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THE INVINCIBLE FIVE.

OR,
**DAN BROWN'S
BIG GAME OF FREEZE-OUT.**

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AUTHOR OF "DAN BROWN OF DENVER," "OLD
'49," "PISTOL JOHNNY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER

HOW THE BIG GAME OPENED.

"NOT a bad lay-out to have in reserve, should luck go crossways with a player in the game of life, eh, fellows?"

"Wish I was hafe as well fixed."

"A dozen such places wouldn't pay a beggar for stepping into the shoes of its owner—curse him!" harshly muttered the last of the trio of horsemen, as they paused to gaze upon the peaceful scene.

Quiet and peaceful enough now, but fated to become the theater of wild and warring passions all too soon, the "Single Pot" ranch lay beneath the clear afternoon sun, a pleasant picture to behold, grimly though the last speaker frowned as his dark eyes rested upon it. A choice location when the first rough timber

of the first rude building was placed in position; an agreeable break in the grassy waste even while in the hands of its original owner, who regarded it only as a means of putting money into his pocket to be spent over the bars and gaming-tables of "civilization;" a model ranch when "Thoroughbred Wheeler" rechristened it after the last hand in that game of "draw," to which reference is still occasionally made by the "profession" as a rare example of nerve; but it remained for Dan Brown of Denver to perfect the scene until, on this beautiful fall day, its equal could not be found in all the list of cattle ranches and stock farms, taking natural and artificial beauties into consideration.

Those who knew Dan Brown only as a detective opened their eyes widely in surprise at this new move on his part. It was difficult to think of him as a man of business at all, and utterly impossible to picture him as a cattle grower, "a thousand miles from anywhere!" They hoped it was only a passing whim on his part, and that he would soon grow tired of the life; but when a man married and had a young family growing up about him, such symptoms were disagreeably suspicious, and the Rocky Mountain Detective Association would soon have to look for a successor to their famous pet sleuthhound.

So predicted those who had followed the professional career of Dan Brown with the closest interest, from the affair with "Captain Moonshine," at Grenada, to his desperate fight for life and honor at Rocky Bar; and there was good foundation for their regrets.

Though no whit the less in love with his perilous profession, Dan Brown began to realize more clearly the claims of his own family, and when he bought the Single Pot Ranch, it was with a half formed intention of doffing his harness for good and all; but it was not to be.

For one year he kept his unspoken resolution, finding a rare delight in training his eldest child, a manly little lad, and in beautifying their surroundings, ably seconded in both by his wife, Rachel. The place was rechristened, but only the occupants called it "Fairview." To the more prosaic stockmen round about it remained Single Pot Ranch.

At the end of that year of peace, quietude and happiness such as the detective had never known before, came a call which Dan Brown of Denver could not refuse, and once more he took the trail of sin and rascality; a trail that began far away from Fairview, only to twist and turn and writhe like a wounded snake, until it flung a poisonous coil about the happy home in the vast range, bringing death and desolation in its wake.

On this pleasant October afternoon, three horsemen drew rein on a slight rise which had until then hidden Fairview from their eyes, and during that brief pause the remarks which open our tale were uttered.

The first speaker was a cross between an Eastern dude and a Western dandy, so far as outward appearances go. He was barely up to the medium height, and his figure was slenderly built, but his neatly fitting garments revealed a perfection of symmetry such as few of the pets of fashion from the sunrise can boast. An experienced observer would have promptly set him down as one of those "devils boiled down," who are more to be feared than his brethren of larger mold, just as the compact rattler is more vicious than the huge bull-snake.

Fine black broadcloth trousers were met at the knee by riding boots of morocco and patent-leather. A belt of silk webbing encircled his round, trim waist, supporting a brace of pearl-handled revolvers and silver-hafted knife. A lawn tennis shirt of the finest merino, laced with a blue silk cord. A broad-brimmed hat of fawn-colored felt was pinned up in front with a gold and enameled pin, representing a large purple and yellow pansy, while another representation of the same flower, with a green leaf and spray, was secured above his head.

His complexion was wonderfully clear and pure, of blended "milk and roses," more befitting a ball-room belle than a man of the border. His features were feminine in their regularity, and when in repose more nearly resembled those of an angel than fiend. His face bore no beard, nor signs of ever having any, but his long, curling locks of hair, soft gold in color, falling about his shoulders, more than made amends.

Such was the outward semblance of John Sand, or, as he was far more widely known from his favorite flower, "Johnny-jump-up."

The second speaker was a startling contrast to the man described, in almost every particular. In bulk he would more than have made two of Johnny-jump-up, for he was nearly seven feet high, and though carrying little superfluous flesh, would pull down the scales at nearly two and one half hundred weight. Like most overgrown men, he was slow and sluggish in his movements, and his broad countenance wore a dull, heavy expression, like one half asleep. Just now it was lighted up with a covetous glow as his sleepy black eyes roved over the prospect.

He was roughly dressed in flannel shirt, canvas trousers, cowhide boots and coarse felt hat. The weapons at his waist, however, were of the finest make and finish, clean and kept in perfect order.

This was Darius Throop, better known as "Johnny's Infant."

The third member of the party, though evidently the leader and head one, was the least conspicuous of the lot, being of average height, neither handsome nor ugly in face, plain of garb, his hair and beard close clipped. His face was hard and expressionless, even as he spoke, though his dark eyes flashed with an evil light and his tones were expressive of intensest hatred. It was a face that had stood its owner in good stead many and many a time when stakes were large and betting ran high over the painted papers; the face of a practiced gambler, and one that told no tales, let him bet on a sure hand or bluff on a broken flush.

A natural-born gamester was Asa Sand, or, as his name came to be transformed, in the parlance of his fellow gamblers, "Aces-and."

"Curse him it is, with all my heart!" lightly laughed Johnny-jump-up, in response to his elder brother. "But curses don't go, or Dan Brown would have been sunk ten thousand fathoms deep in the lowest pit of the foul fiend's dominions, long before he crossed our line of play."

"So much the worse for him, for then there would have been only himself to suffer, while now—"

"We may be the ones to go broke, if we stop much longer to look over the board," interposed Johnny-jump-up, quickly, his golden brows arching as he gazed steadily toward the line of corrals to the rear and left of the house, from the position they then occupied. "There are busy eyes over yonder, and it wouldn't be healthy to awaken suspicion before we make our first lead."

A glance showed Aces-and the meaning concealed in this speech. At one of the corrals a footman was watching them, his curiosity no doubt awakened by the sight of the trio of horsemen. If friends, they would hardly be reconnoitering the ranch before approaching.

"Right enough, Johnny," muttered Aces-and, putting his horse in forward motion as he uttered the words. "We must get in our pretty work before any of the watchdogs can suspect mischief, or there'll be trouble. Dan Brown isn't fool enough to leave his property in charge of cowards or skulkers."

"And that reminds me," smiled Johnny-jump-up, as he deftly removed the pansy from his hat and his breast, stowing them carefully away. "Some of the rascals may have heard of Johnny-jump-up, and for a blind I'll put my name in my pocket. You pull out, and take care for nothing but the run of the cards. Baby and I'll bluff off any gray who tries to chip in before the game is flung open to all."

Aces-and seemed to be a man of action rather than words, for he rode steadily onward without comment or reply, heading direct for the now visible front door of the ranch. A moment later they one and all caught a glimpse of a woman's figure indistinctly outlined against the darker background.

"Looking to see if it isn't her sainted husband coming home for a hug and a kiss," softly laughed Johnny-jump-up. "Play 'em straight, old man, or the dainty critter'll be too mad to even look at your hand. These grass-widows are mighty bad medicine, anyhow!"

"Gray comin'!" muttered Johnny's Infant, warningly, as he caught sight of a cowboy coming around the corner of the house, evidently watching them closely if not suspiciously.

"Too late to hinder, but keep an eye on the fellow, Johnny," said Aces-and in a like guarded tone. "You know the game. Play it straight, if possible. But we've got to win!"

Further speech, even in such guarded tones would have been dangerous, and Johnny-jump-up, leaving his brother to ride direct for the door of the ranch, veered just a trifle to confront the cowboy, saluting him with an easy, off-hand gesture, which courtesy was acknowledged by a short, dubious nod as those keen, wary eyes rapidly summed him up from head to foot.

"Single Pot Ranch, of course?" Johnny-jump-up uttered as he drew rein, brushing one hand across his brow as if to remove the perspiration born of long and hard riding. "Run by Dan Brown?"

The cowboy nodded assent to both propositions, though there was a slightly troubled expression on his honest face as though feeling far from certain that all was right. Johnny-jump-up saw and read this look aright, adding with a feigned breath of relief:

"That's cheerful, anyhow! You do have the biggest bunch of emptiness between anywhere and some place that I ever saw! Seemed like the trail was made of india-rubber, with the Old Boy tugging at this end of it, all the harder the faster we pressed along it!"

"Whar mought ye come from, then?" asked the cowboy, rubbing the tip of his sunburned nose with a perplexed air.

"Right from Dan Brown of Denver, with a message to your mistress, my good fellow," was the easy response as Johnny-jump-up alighted, his example being promptly followed by the giant. "And a hard ride it has been for both man and beast. If you will kindly walk our

nags back and forth for a bit, before watering them, I'll remember you in my will."

It was so easily said, so deftly acted, that a wiser man than the rude cowboy might have fallen into the trap, and without further thought of evil, he took the two horses by the rein and moved with the rascals toward the door of the ranch, where Aces-and had likewise dismounted.

Johnny-jump-up took the reins from the hand of his brother, turning the third animal over to the cowboy with:

"Feed and water them, after cooling, will you? With the lady's permission, of course," and he smiled winningly as he glanced, with a low bow into the face of Mrs. Rachel Brown.

A nod from her set the cowboy wholly at ease, and he moved off toward the nearest corral with the three animals, little dreaming in what bad company he left the mistress whom, in common with all the men employed at Fairview, he fairly adored.

"Be pleased to enter, gentlemen," said Mrs. Brown, in a musical if slightly agitated voice. "Any friend of my husband has a sacred claim on me and mine."

She drew back from the door, stooping to pick up a little girl whose feet were yet far from certain means of locomotion, while one of her hands was clasped by a gallant little lad, whose big blue eyes gravely and steadily regarded the strangers.

She led the way into what might be called a parlor, if such an anomaly could have been found in the heart of the cattle ranges, and motioning the strangers to be seated, still holding the little girl in her arms, she said, her voice just a trifle shaken:

"You have a message for me? A letter, perhaps?"

Aces-and coughed softly behind his hand, casting a half-reproachful glance toward the now grave and decorous face of Johnny-jump-up.

Rachel Brown intercepted that glance, and her heart sunk lower than ever. From the very first she had felt a chill as of impending evil or danger, despite the smooth address of Asa Sand. Brave, strong-nerved, she had no thought of personal danger. All her fears were for her husband, now so long absent from her and the children.

"You have a message?" she persisted, steadying her voice by a powerful effort of will, trying to smile as she spoke. "Pardon my impatience, please, but I caught the words this gentleman spoke to Munson, and—these are his children, and they are so anxious to hear from papa, you see," with a forced laugh that showed how uneasy she was growing.

"I'm papa's little soldier, and I know how to shoot a gun!" boldly uttered Willie Brown.

"Bang-bang!" exploded little Cherry, then hiding her rosy face in her mother's bosom with infantile bashfulness.

Rachel kissed the curly head, but her wistful eyes were fixed on the face of Asa Sand, longing yet fearing to have him speak.

"Well, I don't know as there can be any mistake," slowly uttered the arch-plotter, his tones as grave as his well-trained face. "This is the Single Pot ranch?"

"It was until we altered the title to Fairview."

"Owned by Dan Brown, of Denver?"

"I am his wife, and these are his children, sir."

"Look at the youngster," quietly interposed Johnny-jump-up. "His face talks plain enough to me. There's no mistake this time."

"Worse luck!" muttered the other, with a gloomy frown that still further chilled the blood of the wife and mother. "I could wish I'd never laid eyes on that face, or the one so like it!"

Pale and composed, forcing her emotions under control, Rachel Brown removed the baby's arms from her neck, placing the child on the floor in the further corner, bidding Willie amuse her; then she returned and confronted Aces-and, her voice hard and steady:

"Sir, you have said too much not to say more. Do you bring me a message from my husband? Where is he, and when did you leave him? What was he doing? Man! if you have a single gleam of pity or mercy in your heart, do not keep me in this horrible suspense any longer!"

Grave and sober sounded the voice of the gambler as he rose to his feet and faced the poor woman. So unlike his usual self that Johnny's Infant turned his face aside to smother a grin of delighted amazement.

"If I have hesitated, madam, it has been for your own sake, and with a vague hope that, after all, despite all, I might have made a mistake. I am not yet thoroughly convinced, though, as my mate mentioned, there is a truly remarkable resemblance between the face of that lad, and that of the man for whose sake we have taken this long trip."

"Willie is the perfect picture of his father, so our friends say," uttered Rachel Brown, one hand pressed tightly over her heart.

"I am sorry to hear it," was the grave response.

"Why so? What cause have you for being sorry? You said you came from my husband, bearing a message—why do you not deliver it? Do you want to drive me raving mad?"

"So far from it, madam, I have done my clumsy best to break the sad tidings to you. If I have failed, then—"

With a desperate effort Rachel Brown regained her self-control, outwardly, at least, and sunk back in her chair, a faint smile touching her pale lips. The first shock over, she was enabled to look at the matter more calmly, and hope was renewed in her bosom.

"I thank you for your generous consideration sir," she said, as Aces-and stared at her in doubt, his dark eyes beginning to glow again. "You mean well, and I am grateful, even while I begin to believe I have been alarmed without sufficient cause."

"I hope so, I'm sure!" muttered the traitor, dubiously watching the still rarely beautiful woman before him. "I wish I could believe it, but I'm sadly afraid you are grasping at a straw, just now."

"I can tell better when I hear your reasons for so thinking, sir."

"May I tell the story, then?"

Rachel Brown bowed, half-proudly. Somehow she began to suspect this man. There was a glow in his eyes that reminded her of a serpent, coiled and ready for striking. His face seemed more and more evil the closer she scanned it. His very tones seemed to echo insincerely.

Ah, if she had only acted promptly on the instinct that warned her!

"If you will. That will be the shortest way to the truth," she contented herself with uttering.

Aces-and moistened his lips before speaking, and Johnny-jump-up noiselessly rose to his feet, passing over to the open window under pretense of relieving a tobacco-laden mouth. He cast a swift, covert glance around, then returned to his seat, coughing softly.

That sound assured Aces-and that there were no breakers in view, and he began his carefully arranged recital:

"It happened after a rather curious fashion, which I will be glad to explain to you more at length presently, if you choose to hear the details, madam, that we became mixed up in a horse-thief scrape, three days ago, near the upper line. Among others, our stock was run off, and of course we joined in the chase which followed."

"At first the pursuers consisted only of citizens and ranchers, but we had hardly struck the trail before we were joined by a little squad of men, led by the one whose face so closely resembled that of your little son."

"Did you learn his name?"

"Not then, nor ever from his own lips," was the grave reply.

Rachel Brown turned pale as death once more, but now she had her nerves too thoroughly under control for them to betray the real depth of her anxiety. And then—she felt that her husband was living!

"It was a long and a hard chase, but at last we came upon the marauders, though which party was the most thoroughly surprised, it would be difficult to say. Of course there was a fight, and men with a halter about their necks fight hard and savagely. I've been in more than one tight place in my time, but never before did I know what fighting to the bitter death meant!"

"Rather warm, while it lasted, and it lasted almost too long for genuine comfort," softly muttered Johnny-jump-up.

"Yet neither of you three gentlemen seem to have been seriously injured," quietly interposed Rachel Brown, smiling just a trifle as she noted the red flush that came into the face of Asa Sand.

"As kind Providence would have it, madam," bowed Aces-and. "It is not boasting to say that we fought the best we knew how, for it was either that or death, and a coward couldn't have slipped out of the game while it lasted. But of all the dare-devil fighting, the man on whose account we have journeyed so far out of our way did it! Wherever he rode, there men tumbled over like tenpins. Busy as I was kept, I couldn't help watching his movements, for they were the very perfection of daring and nerve. Oh, it was glorious—glorious!"

It seemed as though he was trying to break down the enforced composure of the wife sitting opposite him, but she gave no sign, other than that her fingers closed more tightly as her hands lay folded in her lap. Her eyes glowed steadily as they watched him, trying to read the truth there, rather than in his words.

But Aces-and was thoroughly on his guard now, and whatever disappointment he may have felt, none was suffered to show itself.

"At last we got the best of the game, and the few survivors of the gang fled for dear life. After them this man led the way, and though he was marking the trail with his blood at every jump of his horse, he stuck to business until he brought down the last one of the outfit. And then, as though his strength had been given him only to make his work thorough, he reeled and fell headlong to the ground!"

"Not dead?" gasped the poor woman, unable to keep up that semblance of composure longer. "Say he was not dead!"

"He was not dead," was the slow response. "He was living when we reached his side, though he bore wounds deep and numerous enough to let out the life of an elephant, one would think."

"And then you heard his name?"

"Not then, though, as I knelt on the blood-stained sward beside him, I asked for it. I asked him if he had any friends or relatives to whom he wished a message to be sent."

"And he said—"

"More than I could distinctly make out. Only the words wife, children, love; then something about kissing, and not to grieve. That was all, in words, but he tried to take something from his bosom, which I afterward found: at least, there was a picture hidden over his heart, and I fancied that must be the token he hinted at."

"This picture—you have brought it?" panted Rachel Brown, rising to her feet, with agony so intense in her voice that even the two children were frightened into scrambling to their feet. "Give it—show it to me, man! Would you drive me crazy?"

"Be calm, madam, for their sakes, if not for your own," gravely uttered Aces-and as he also arose, in which he was imitated by his two comrades in evil. "Remember that there may be some mistake. Your husband may still be living, though the name was the same: Dan Brown."

"You said he never uttered it!"

"Nor did he, but another of the party told me, after all was over."

"Sol Scott? Why did he not bring the message?"

"Because he was dead, also. I knew him by sight, but he was shot down at the first fire. And one of the others told me the two were partners, Sol Scott and your—the man I am speaking about."

"The picture! Give me—"

She could say no more. She felt now that all was lost. It must be so. Her wild hopes were forgotten; they could have no foundation in truth.

The picture—that would solve all doubts!

In her intense agitation the poor woman did not notice the peculiar movements of the other two men. Johnny-jump-up moved around until he stood behind her, and at a motion from his hand the giant stepped across the room until he could grasp both of the children before they could escape or even utter a warning cry.

Then Aces-and grasped both of those trembling hands and pinned them to her side, while John Sand clasped his hand over her lips, bending her painfully back and holding her helpless, speechless. But even in that bitter extremity her true bravery revealed itself in the clear, dauntless glow in her eyes.

Aces-and laughed with devilish triumph, as he replied to that unspoken question:

"What does it all mean? That Dan Brown of Denver has lost the first deal in a mighty big game of freeze-out, my dainty beauty!"

CHAPTER II.

A KNAVE IN THE NOOSE.

"HUSTLE along, Jimmy, fer that bull-neck o' yours won't stan' much stretchin' afoot, an' it'd be a monstrous pity fer to spile your big tight-rope act on nothin' fer a platform—'deed it jes' would, now!"

Leaning forward in his saddle, the burly speaker handled his lithe-lashed rawhide, a muffled howl of mingled pain and hatred telling how effectually.

"Twist the critter's tail ef he goes to balkin'," grinned the leading horseman with a glance over his shoulder. "It's all a mean waste o' time, when two ropes'd 'a' done the job up jes' as well; but thank the Lord! yender comes the timmer, whar we kin yank the dirty glue-fingers into eternity in heap tony style!"

"You got no right! I ain't done nothin'! It's bloody murder ef you do!" gasped the prisoner, his face ghastly and distorted, quite as much from deadly fear as from the pressure of the cruel rope which fitted so tightly about his throat.

It was a spectacle only too frequently witnessed in the more lawless portions of the West, where might makes right and every man is a law unto himself.

A half-score horsemen riding briskly along over the dry, brown prairie. One of their number with a lengthened lasso at his saddle-bow, leading back to the neck of a ragged, dirty, bloodstained wretch whose hands were tightly bound behind his back, whose eyes were filled with a sullen, brutish glow of mingled hatred and terror, whose parched and swollen lips were beginning to tinge with froth.

For mile after mile the leader had pressed on, his horse sometimes breaking into a trot that caused the miserable wretch at its heels to run pantingly in order to escape being dragged from his footing. And surrounding the captured horse-thief, the remainder of the party pelted him with taunts and gibes, interspersed with occasional blows to quicken his flagging footsteps.

Not a pleasant scene to linger over, but one with an important bearing on the story which we have set out to narrate.

The doomed wretch cast a blurred glance ahead of the party, and as he caught a dim glimpse of the little clump of timber showing nearly a mile in advance, a choking cry escaped his parched lips.

"It'll be bloody murder, ef you do, gents—bloody murder!"

"Murder nothin', you p'izen hoss-thief!" angrily growled the leader of the little band. "'Tain't murder to kill a hoss-thief, an' you've deserved hangin' a thousan' times over this ten year' an' more!"

"It's all a lie! I never done it! You can't prove nothin' on—"

"Nur we don't mean to make the try, which is lucky fer you, Doughball Jimmy. Lucky, fer we could prove enough stealin's fer to hang you a million times over, ef so be your p'izen neck'd stan' the w'ar an' t'ar. As it is, when we come to yender handy bunch o' timmer, we'll jes' pass this eend o' my trail-rope over a limb an' mosey on, leavin' you to foller after or not, jes' as it may happen."

"An' the fu'st gospel-sharp we jump, Jimmy, we'll make him ax forgiveness fer us all fer lettin' sech a dirty thief as you be-curse the airth so long, when you'd orter bin hung ten year afore your dad an' mam was born. Ef I was that sort o' kitten, durned ef I wouldn't kiver my head with a black cloth an' hunt out a nunnery—I would so!"

"Which it wouldn't be no wuss than we all deserve, that's so," chimed in another worthy, with a lugubrious up-rolling of his dark eyes. "But mebbe we'll git forgiveness, now we're doin' the best we know to make things go even off."

"It's a mighty shame he hain't got a neck to fill each rope!"

"Mebbe we kin tickle the critter back to life a few times, so's to give the lot a kinder show."

"'Twon't do no harm to make the try, anyhow!" and the last speaker nodded grim approval.

The party had come to a temporary halt while indulging in this grimly ferocious pleasantry, and the doomed wretch glared with his blood-shot eyes at one after another as the clumsy wit ran around the circle. He saw that if all was not meant, at least one point was settled beyond dispute; he must expiate his many sins by suffering death.

There was one faint hope to which he had clung through all, and in his utter desperation he made use of it just as the cruel rope began to tighten around his throat once more.

"It'll be wuss than death to him, ef you do! Butcher me, an' he'll never know in time—never know ontel they're lost forever! An' then he'll come down onto you all wuss then a painter, Dan Brown will!"

"Dan who?" growled the chief of the cow-boys, abruptly checking his horse and turning in his saddle once more, his eyes all aglow.

"Dan Brown o' Denver—him as runs the Single Pot Ranch—take me to him, or wuss'll come of it fer you all!" hastily spluttered the doomed wretch, his face lighting up with a curious mingling of hope, terror and defiance.

"Dan Brown be durned!" growled the cowboy, with a frown. "What's he got to do with us or you?"

"I know somethin' that he'd give his right arm to hear in time!" was the eager reply. "It'll be wuss than death to more than him ef you don't give me a chaine to tell it to him!"

"That's too slazy fer a 'skeeter-bar, even!" laughed another of the party, as his whip cracked viciously close to the ear of the captive. "We hain't got no use fer a bluff o' that caliber, Jimmy!"

"It's God's own truth, gents!" tremblingly cried the poor devil, as he saw how deeply this skeptical speech had sunk into the minds of the majority. "I've got that to tell as would make Dan Brown turn—"

"Then spit it out, durn ye fer a troublesome critter!"

"Take me to him, an' I'll do it quick enough, gents."

"Take you to glory, why don't you ax?" angrily cried the chief of his captors. "Who kin say whar Dan Brown is? Who's to ride all over creation fer Dan Brown, jes' beca'se you've got a cock-an'-bull yarn to buzz? Not me, for one, anyhow."

"Durned fools ef we did, too!" echoed another.

"It's w'uth more then life to him, I tell ye!" fairly howled the terrified but sullen wretch, the fires of madness deepening in his bloodshot eyes, his swollen tongue feverishly licking his cracked and bleeding lips. "He'd give all his wealth fer what I can tell him!"

"Tell us, an' we'll pass it on to him, then."

"I won't! Not a word—not a grunt!" hoarsely muttered the captive. "Only to him—only to Dan Brown o' Denver!"

He flung himself upon the ground, quivering and gasping with bodily fear, but with a dogged glow in his eyes that told how much he was resolved to endure before parting with his last frail hope.

"They's more than one way to skin a cat, Bill," cried one of the cowboys, addressing the one who held the lasso. "Say the word, an' I'll

agree to thrash the hull truth out o' the p'izen critter afore a mad bull kin flick his fly-flapper twicet!"

Lightly the speaker leaped from saddle to ground, his whip hissing through the air and its lash cutting a gash in the dry sod close to the ear of the prostrate wretch. Dough-ball Jimmy shivered and closed his eyes, but doggedly muttered:

"You kin cut my heart out, but you can't make me tell it only to Dan Brown o' Denver! Take me to him, an' you'll never regret it. Kill me afore I kin tell him what I know, an' he'll—"

Was it instinct that caused the poor devil to open his eyes and cast a swift glance off over the prairie? Did the fear of death sharpen his senses that he recognized the horseman who sat motionless just over the little swell in the plain, his torso and the back of his animal alone visible?

A wild, hysterical laugh burst from his bleeding lips as he leaped to his feet, glaring eagerly, madly toward that rider.

"It's him—take me to him! It's Dan Brown o' Denver! Thank the good Lord fer all his marcies!"

All eyes were turned instinctively toward the distant horseman, and a frown darkened the bronzed face of Bill Hampton.

"Durned of the critter ain't right, boys! That's Dan Brown!"

"Or his pard, Sol Scott," interposed another. "One's so much like both you can't tell t'other from which!"

"It's Dan Brown, I tell ye!" howled Dough-ball Jimmy, in an ecstasy of mingled hopes and fears. "Take me thar—call to him, some o' you fellers! I can't—my thrapple's all dried out! Call to him—of you let him go off now, it'll be wuss then bloody murder! Call him!"

"Dan Brown, Sol Scott nur the Old Boy hisself can't save you this bout, Jimmy," grimly uttered Bill Hampton, giving the lasso an impatient twitch as he rode slowly forward. "You've run the len'th o' your rope, Jimmy. We ketched you red-handed, so to speak, an' they's only the one sort o' law fer critters o' that kidney. That's the rope!"

"He'll save me! He'll give me my life for the news I kin tell him!"

"Ef I thought as much, durned little life they would be left into ye by the time we git up to him!" growled Hampton, touching his horse with the spur, causing it to bound forward so suddenly that Dough-ball Jimmy was flung face downward to the ground.

With a choking, muffled howl, he scrambled to his feet, then rushed forward, shouting as loud as the tight noose would permit, only to be surrounded by the cowboys and lashed into silence with their whips.

"The durned hot-head!" snorted Bill Hampton, as he saw the single horseman lift a rifle from its slings at his saddle-bow, bringing it to a level and covering them significantly. "Ef he slings lead this way, bein' Dan Brown or Sol Scott won't keep his hide hull! Hey! you blame fool critter?" he yelled at the top of his voice, raising his right hand with palm toward the bold horseman. "We ain't huntin' lead from the likes o' you!"

The gesture, if not the accompanying words, seemed to be recognized, for lowering his rifle, though still holding it in readiness, the horseman rode rapidly toward them, sitting his spirited animal with an ease and grace which the cowboys, born riders themselves, were not slow to recognize and admire.

Tall, athletic, his superb figure admirably displayed by his action, the horseman dashed on, his animal coming to an abrupt halt when one hundred yards distant, seemingly of its own free will. Any but a thorough rider would have been hurled from his seat, or at least shaken by that abrupt stoppage, but not so this man. He seemed part and parcel of the gallant steed, and again the cowboys interchanged glances of approval.

"Close enough is heap better then too close, pard!" cried Bill Hampton, with a significant gesture. "Specially when you've got one finger on trigger. You didn't leave your name ahind ye, I reckon?"

"Dan Brown—save me!" hoarsely cried Dough-ball Jimmy, desperately hurling himself through the circle of horsemen. "Save me, or wuss'll come to them as you—"

A savage jerk on the rope choked him off, but apparently he had said enough to satisfy the stranger, for replacing his rifle in its slings, he held up his empty hand and advanced.

A strong, handsome face, well matching the athletic figure; a face that would instinctively attract an honest man, even as it would repel a criminal. Dark blue eyes, bold and searching, mild and genial, according to the feelings that governed their owner at the moment. A full, drooping pair of mustaches, with the rest of the manly face clean shaven. Rich brown hair, close trimmed.

His garb was evidently designed for service, rather than looks, though it was neater than might have been expected on one who had evidently seen hard and steady work for many a day past. Stout boots, coming over the knees;

trowsers of drab corduroy; a gray shirt of flannel, laced in front with a silken cord; a loosely knotted neckerchief beneath the broad collar; a felt hat with low crown and broad rim.

About his waist was a cartridge-belt, well supplied with ammunition both for the repeating rifle that hung from his saddle-bow and passed beneath one muscular thigh, and the brace of heavy revolvers which, with a stout, serviceable knife, were attached to the same belt.

"Dan Brown, I reckon?" added Bill Hampton, more as a query than an assertion, however, for though he had met both of the famous detectives quite frequently of late, even now he could not say which one of the twain sat before him, so strong was the resemblance since Sol Scott sacrificed his long blonde beard.

Having regained his breath from that savage jerk, Dough-ball Jimmy again pressed forward, gasping hoarsely:

"Thank the good Lord it's you, boss! Save me from these—"

Coldly the detective gazed at him, his face hard and pitiless, and as the poor devil broke off in a gasp of despair, he spoke icily:

"I have nothing to do with you. You are not of my game."

A yell of relief broke from the lips of the cowboys that drowned the despairing groan of their destined victim, and the manner in which their worst passions broke forth told how strong had been their expectation of losing their prey.

"Good as a fat three-year old!"

"Skip on to the timmer, an' h'ist the hoss-thief up to heaven!"

"Whar's the use in so much trouble?" cried another, with a wild, chilling laugh. "Le's have a pullin' match! Five dollars on my cayuse! Who takes it up?"

"Durn the bettin'!" cried still another. "It's fun we want, an' a fa'r show fer all! Turn the critter loose an' le's all start in even. The best rope takes the fust choke!"

"Anythin' to keep peace in the fambly," laughed Bill Hampton, as he wheeled his horse and bent over to remove the noose from about the neck of their captive.

But Dough-ball Jimmy evaded his grasp and made a desperate dash toward the detective, howling in desperation:

"Let 'em bloody murder me, an' you'll regret it to your dyin' day, Dan Brown! Ef you let 'em kill me, nothin' won't save your wife an'—"

A startling change came over the detective as he caught these words, and with a swift motion he interposed between the captive and the cowboys, his handsome face stern and commanding, a revolver filling his right hand.

"The durned critter is lyin', pard—"

"It's God's truth, I tell ye!" gasped Dough-ball Jimmy, looking more like a madman than aught sane as he cowered behind the detective, desperately resisting the choking strain which Bill Hampton was putting on the lasso. "I kin save 'em, but if they bloody murder me—"

"We ketched him red-handed, so to speak, pard," added Hampton, in a milder tone, flinching ever so little from that ugly weapon. "He's a hoss-thief, an' hes bin runnin' off stock fer years gone by. You ain't the man to stan' up fer the likes o' him, I don't reckon?"

"Until he has time to say just what he means by those words, I am, my good fellow," was the cold reply.

"They's a rope fer the likes o' him, too, ef he's so mighty hungry fer it!" growled one of the cowboys, with an ugly scowl.

"Which he'll git, rather then Dough-ball gits loose, mind that!"

With a cold, icy smile the detective glanced around the circle, his blue eyes glittering with a dangerous light. He did not look like a man to be driven from a position once taken, by fear of a rope.

"Keep your linen on, gentlemen," he said, his tones soft and even musical, as his lips curled in a smile that was more significant than loud threats. "If you ever heard of Sol Scott, you know he don't bluff down any too easy. This poor devil says he has an important secret—"

"Not fer Sol Scott—I'll tell it only to Dan Brown o' Denver!" gasped Dough-ball Jimmy, his terror rendering him doubly unwise. "I won't trust it to anybody else. You'd on'y cheat me out o' my life! You wouldn't stan' atween me an' the rope, like—"

"You hear that, pard?" and Bill Hampton laughed sneeringly. "It's on'y a wild bluff the critter is tryin' to save his neck. He don't know nothin'. It's all guff."

"I do know!" howled the half-mad wretch, resisting the renewed pressure of the choking noose. "I know that they's death an' wuss in the wind fer Dan Brown's fambly! I'm the on'y man as kin tell the hull truth so's they kin be saved! I swar it by my life!"

"Fact is the pesky critter hes gone clean off his nut, pard," confidentially muttered Hampton, to the detective. "He never was much more than a cowardly sneak, Dough-ball wasn't, at the very best, though he could sneak, an' spy an' run off hoss-critters ekil to a Injun. He—"

But Sol Scott was paying no heed to his words. The detective was gazing keenly into the haggard and fear-drawn countenance of the

prisoner, striving to read the truth there. Even his penetration was at fault just then, so utterly had the dread of death taken possession of the miserable wretch.

Coldly, sharply he spoke to Dough-ball Jimmy.

"Look here, my man. Try and calm yourself enough to weigh my words carefully. Are you speaking the truth? Do you know anything important concerning the family of Dan Brown? Easy! Don't speak wildly, now."

"Fore God I do, boss!" was the husky reply. "Take me to him—let me see him, or when he comes to know you shet down on me, he'll cuss you from then to forever! Jes' let me see Dan Brown o' Denver!"

Sol Scott rose erect in his saddle, his face hard and stern-set. He faced the cowboys with the air of a master, and spoke clearly:

"I'm going to give the rascal a show. Dan Brown, my pard, is over in yonder timber. You will take the fellow to him, and let him tell his story. If he's hatching up lies, so much the worse for him!"

As he spoke, Sol Scott fired one shot in the air, then emitted a long, shrill whistle that seemed to split the air for miles.

"Got to, you say?" muttered Hampton, with an ugly frown.

"That's precisely what I said," was the cold retort, as Sol Scott recocked his revolver. "If you are agreeable, all right. If not—I'll take him there myself. Make your choice, gentlemen!"

CHAPTER III.

DOUGH-BALL JIMMY THROWS UP HIS HAND.

ONE man against half a score.

But it did not look such heavy odds, after all, as the cowboys stared into the dark muzzles of the twin revolvers over which those steel-blue eyes were glancing. In those first few seconds all the marvelous tales they had heard concerning the desperate prowess and unequalled nerve of Sol Scott flashed athwart their minds, and as Bill Hampton—even doughy Bill, a bit of a chief and a fire-eater himself—visibly flinched from that bold front, his mates took no shame to themselves that they, too, shrunk back a trifle. But even as they did so, it seemed to each one of the ten that one, if not both, of those grim muzzles kept pace with their movements—each man could have honestly taken oath that he in particular was honored by that deadly aim.

"I'm not trying to crowd you, gentlemen," added Sol Scott, in his cold, even tones, betraying not a particle of anger or irritation, but sounding all the more impressive for that very absence of hatred. "I would hate desperately to hurt any one of your number, for I believe you to be honest, square men; but all the same, when I say you've got to take Dough-ball Jimmy over to yonder grove of trees, for an interview with my pard, Dan Brown, of Denver, I mean every syllable I say."

"Got to is mighty tough words to swallow, though!" muttered Bill Hampton, with a deepening scowl as he fancied the detective was beginning to weaken.

"Not so tough chewing as a couple of bullets, though," was the swift retort. "As I said, take your choice. Guide the rascal to Dan Brown, or I'll do it."

"An' we ten to your one?"

"Just now you are, but Dan Brown is afoot by this time, and if you wait until he comes up—well, I reckon you'll fancy the ten has run up against a whole regiment!" laughed Sol Scott.

"Ef you'd on'y axed it white-like, it wouldn't—"

"That's where you are, is it?" smiled Sol Scott. "All right. I'm not so squeamish. Mr. Hampton, will you stoop so low as to condescend to be so kind as to permit this poor devil to pay his respects to Dan Brown, of Denver, under your highly honorable escort? Grant the humble prayer of your meek servant, and we will ever pray, etc., and-so-forth!"

This was an improvement with a vengeance, and Hampton frowned more blackly than ever, but that was all. The supreme coolness of this detective impressed him powerfully, and as he now caught sight of a second horseman spurring rapidly from the timber, he made the best of a disagreeable matter.

"I reckon you kin see the p'int o' your own joke, pard, but—"

"Jest or sober earnest, just as you prefer, my good fellow."

"It ain't hardly wu'th while spillin' clean blood over a dirty cuss like Dough-ball Jimmy," persisted Hampton, ignoring the polite interjection. He's a hoss-thief, ketched red-handed, an' as sech sentenced to the rope. You can't save him ef you try. A few minnits one way or the other won't make much difference. Ef you think he kin tell Dan Brown anythin' wu'th while, why, so fur's I'm consarned, the rope kin wait. But it's on'y waitin', you want to understand."

"So far as I am concerned, that is perfectly satisfactory," replied Sol Scott, lightly. "It's Dan Brown and you for it, now. And you," turning to Dough-ball Jimmy, with a half-pitying, half-stern expression on his handsome face,

"want to mind your eye. If you've been playing a bluff, guard yourself. Dan Brown is worse than a bear with a sore head when roused from a needed sleep, as now. If you can't satisfy him, I don't envy your reward!"

The tramp of oncoming hoofs was now distinctly audible, and turning in that direction, Sol Scott raised one hand and made a peculiar gesture. The horseman at once jerked up his animal, then turned and galloped back toward the grove of trees.

"It's more comfortable talking in the shade," Sol said, lightly, as the cowboys stared at him wonderingly. "And then, if Dough-ball has been stuffing us with wind-pudding, a tree will come handy."

"It's all right, ef they ain't no trick hid onder it," grimly muttered Hampton. "Mebbe you've got a crowd hid in yender, an' think to take the critter out o' our han's."

Sol Scott laughed softly.

"Would I go to so much trouble, when I had him as good as in my hands a bit ago? Don't fool yourself, my dear fellow. I'm not going about the country trying to save the necks of horse-thieves from the rope they so richly deserve. Just the contrary; we are spending our days in trying to rid this region of those very curses."

The cowboy was silenced if not convinced, but when he rode into the the clump of timber, it was with a hand on a revolver-butt.

This was a needless precaution, as he quickly saw, for only one man was found therein; a man so marvelously like Sol Scott in face, figure, dress and even voice, that he could be none other than Dan Brown of Denver, the still famed detective.

Now that his fate was about to be put to the test, Dough-ball Jimmy found his voice failing him, and he stood breathlessly watching the only man who could—as he believed—save his neck from the hangman's noose, while Bill Hampton was introduced to the detective by Sol Scott.

"You see the critter, yender?" added the cowboy, with a sidelong jerk of his head toward Dough-ball Jimmy. "He's bin a hoss-thief fer more years then I kin count up without stoppin' to think. We ketched him with a stolen hoss between his legs, an' was jes' goin' to rope him to never-come back-ag'in, when he up with a cock-an'-bull story 'bout how he could save your fambly by tellin' somethin' or—"

With a swift stride Dan Brown of Denver gained the side of the trembling wretch, grasping him by both shoulders and gazing keenly into his haggard, fear-drawn countenance. For a brief space thus, then he released him, speaking coldly:

"I've got the rascal down in my books. He does the dirty work for Aces-and and that vile gang. You couldn't have made much of a mistake had you strung him up the instant you caught him."

"It ain't too late yit," grinned Hampton, with an air of relief.

"Don't let him!" gasped the wretch, hugging closer to Dan Brown, his face full of horror. "I'll tell you the hull story—I'll sell out the gang an' all thar secruts, ef on'y you'll give me my life! I ain't fitten to die, I ain't!"

"And still less fitten to live," was the stern re-tort. "I can do nothing for you, beyond advising these gentlemen to take you to the proper authorities for trial."

"Which we're them, an' here's the gallows ready built!"

"Whar the jedge an' jury says h'ist him up quicker'n scat!"

"Don't let 'em!" screamed the miserable criminal as those strong hands again fastened upon his person. "Ef you do, salt cain't save your wife an young-uns, Dan Brown!"

"Wait a bit, my good friends," said Sol Scott interposing. "I don't believe my pard rightly understands the matter, as yet. Time enough before sunset. Let the poor devil confess, if he will."

"What do you mean?" Dan Brown demanded gazing sternly into the face of the prisoner. "What danger threatens my family? Speak out!"

Life is very dear to even a wretch like this, and narrow as had been his escape from death thus far, he refused to take warning from them. Treacherous himself, he had no faith in others. He felt that unless he made terms for his life before speaking, he would be cheated out of it afterward.

"Say you'll save me from them devils!" he gasped, hoarsely, almost inarticulately. "Sw'ar you'll give me my life an' let me go free when I've told you all, or I'll die with my mouth shet—so thar!"

"It's on'y a bluff, pard," impatiently muttered Hampton.

"If so, it will not deceive old players like us," coolly interposed Sol Scott, who, somehow, seemed to place more confidence in the criminal than any of the rest. "Let him have it out, will you?"

Mild enough the tones, milder still the manner, of the detective, but for all that Bill Hampton gave way. He felt that Sol Scott was

ready to change both tone and manner, should the occasion require, and the one specimen of his metal was sufficient for that day.

Dan Brown gazed steadily into the face of the prisoner for a few moments, but he could read nothing satisfactory there. He had been on the go for a month and more, losing both sleep and rest, until his usually clear and swift perceptions were more dulled than he knew. Like the head cowboy, he believed the miserable rascal was trying a bluff as the last hope of saving himself from the doom he so richly merited.

"I make no terms in advance to such men as you are," he uttered, coldly. "If you have anything worth listening to, give it utterance. If it is worth a life, you shall have your pay. Out with it."

"Sw'ar to stan' them cusses off, an' I'll squeal—not unless!" desperately uttered Dough-ball Jimmy.

"If you were an innocent man, or if there was even the ghost of a doubt as to your deserving death by the rope, I would cheerfully agree to do that; but you don't even pretend that you are anything but a horse-thief, whom these gentlemen—"

"Caught red-handed, with the stolen critter atween his two legs!" interrupted Hampton, taking fresh courage from the black and ugly looks which he saw among his fellows. "No white man ain't goin' to cut in to cheat the rope o' no sech dirty whelp."

"Nur no two men cain't stan' us off, like the whelp thinks," sullenly growled a burly cowboy, hitching his revolvers around.

It was an unlucky speech for his side. Dan Brown, worn and harassed, sorely tried in both body and mind, was in just the right condition to take fire at a spark, and with a cold smile he turned upon the last speaker.

"You believe what you say, of course, but I wouldn't bet too big a pile on it, were I you, dear fellow. After all, the scoundrel has a fair claim to a fair trial before a different court than this. Hanging spoils a man, while a few years in prison might make an angel of him, so to speak. He'd look well with a pair of wings sprouting!"

A low, disagreeable laugh parted the lips of the detective as he turned once more upon the prisoner, unheeding the black and ugly looks which the cowboys were interchanging.

Very unlike an angel was Dough-ball Jimmy just then; his haggard face still more repulsive as his fears and hopes wrestled for the upper hand. Huskily he whined once more:

"It's true—so help me—"

"The devil, of course," interposed Dan Brown of Denver. "You rascal, I know you. I've got your name down in my black-book. You are a horse-thief, if no worse. The prison is just hungry for lame ducks of your caliber!"

A flash of sullen rage came into the dirty, blood-stained face.

"You send me thar, an' you'll shed tears o' blood fer it, all the rest o' your life!"

Dan Brown uttered a laugh, cold and hard, unheeding the grave and anxious looks of his brother detective.

"That's a chestnut, grown old and moldy ages and ages ago."

Bill Hampton fancied he saw his chance, and put in:

"Ef you two cain't make no bargain, whar's the use in waitin' an' wastin' any more time? A rope the dirty cuss was born fer, an' here it is, ready noosed, an' jes' a-pantin' fer work!"

"Yank him up, an' jaw afterwards!"

"That's business in a minnit!"

Hampton tightened the rope, but it was caught in the iron grip of Dan Brown, the detective, coldly smiling into the angry face above him.

"You heard me say that this fellow is one of those down in my black-book, didn't you, dear fellow? He is my game."

"Which we run down an' ketched without any o' your help, didn't we, boys?"

"Waal, I should remark."

"Mighty right we jes' did!"

"An' we know how to hang on to what we ketched, too, I reckon!"

Sullenly, defiantly, Bill Hampton turned to Dan Brown once more as these and similar ejaculations broke from the lips of his fellows.

"You kin see fer yourself how the boys look at it. I don't reckon you want to buck the crowd single-handed?"

"A pair of us, remember," quietly interjected Sol Scott.

"An' we're ten! You cain't fight the crowd, but you'll hev to afore you git this dirty dog from us, that's flat!"

"More difficult things than that have been done; but, after all, it would be a pity to get to pulling hair over such a miserable cur as this Dough-ball Jimmy," and Dan Brown turned once more toward the miserable captive, his tones growing still sharper as he demanded:

"What is it you expect of me, anyhow?"

"To stan' off the gang—to keep me from the rope—to give me life an' liberty!" hoarsely gasped the horse-thief.

"Is that all?" and the detective arched his brows in mock surprise. "Why don't you ask for the entire universe and done with it?"

"It's wu'th more'n that to you, what I kin tell you," persisted the prisoner. "I kin show up the hull gang. It's a monstrous big game they're playin', an'—"

"Why didn't you come to me with your wares a month ago?" smiled Dan Brown, with a slight gesture of impatience and disgust. "Then it would have been welcome news; now it is too ancient. I know the whole game, and so will the world before many days more."

"You ain't got it all—not that 'bout your fambly!" spluttered Dough-ball Jimmy, his bloodshot eyes almost starting from their sockets as his last frail hope seemed to be escaping his grasp.

Dan Brown started sharply at those words, and his entire manner underwent a change as complete as it was sudden. His eyes glowed like balls of burning steel as he grasped the horse-thief by the shoulder with a force that almost made his finger-tips meet in the flesh. His voice was harsh and strained as he grated:

"What do you mean? What do you know about my family?"

"Promise fu'st! Sw'ar to give me life an' set me loose, or I'm a shet clam fer good an' all!" doggedly persisted the criminal.

The iron grip on his shoulder tightened, and was supplemented by another on his thigh. Then, with a hard, ugly laugh, the border detective heaved the rascal into the air, holding him above his head at arm's length, threatening to cast him with crushing violence to the earth.

"You pitiful cur!" came gratingly through his tightly-clinched teeth. "Would you play such a silly bluff on me?"

The cowboys looked on in silence. If not wholly satisfied, they did not care enough to interfere with the detective just then. It was too much like crowding in between a mountain lion and its prey.

Not so Sol Scott. Cooler, less worn and wearied than his partner, he believed he could read something deeper than a lie under all this, and with a swift, firm grasp, he checked the enraged athlete.

"Give him a show, pard," he said, quietly, as those blazing orbs were turned upon him. "You're worn out, and your temper is too hot, just now. Let me have the handling of this fellow. I ask it as a favor."

Where threats and remonstrances might—would—have failed, this plea succeeded, and Dan Brown lowered the trembling, half dead wretch to the ground. With a short laugh, he said:

"All right, pard. Take the animal and use him as your own."

Fawningly Dough-ball Jimmy bent his head and touched the hand of his rescuer with his parched and bleeding lips. Sol Scott drew the member back hastily, giving it a little shake of disgust, but the poor devil did not seem to notice the action.

"I won't fergit it to ye, boss, ef I be a dirty whelp an' a hoss-thief! I wouldn't trust to his word now, but I will to yours. You'll give it? You won't let them devils stretch my neck this bout?"

"I make no promises blindly," was the cold response. "If you have anything of importance to say, spit it out and trust to my honor for your reward. If you deserve a reprieve, be sure you shall have it, even though ten times ten men stood in the way. But take care, my man! If you are trying to play it on us, you'll have scant time in which to repent of your folly. You understand that?"

Dough-ball Jimmy hesitated, searching the cold, grave face before him as keenly as his injured eyesight would admit, still suspicious, still fearful of losing his last chance for life.

Sol Scott frowned impatiently, partly turning away as though on the point of dropping the matter altogether.

"I'm not coaxing you to pour forth your secrets, Dough-ball. I don't more than half believe you have any worth the hearing. But if you have, you are playing the silly ass in holding on to them so tightly. The rope is cocksure, if you don't purchase your life. The other way there is at least a chance for you to cheat the gallows. You are worse than foolish not to jump at it, hot-foot!"

"You won't go back onto it, boss?" whined the poor devil.

"If it is worth it, you shall go free. That is my last word on this point. Take it or leave it, and that in a hurry!"

Even that poor, half-crazed wretch could no longer doubt the utter sincerity of the detective, and in fear and trembling he spoke:

"You know the gang you've been huntin'—the outfit led by the man they call Aces-and?"

Sol Scott bowed, and Dan Brown moved a little closer.

"Waal, they've got tired o' runnin' an' skulkin'. They knowed they was all marked down, an' in thar desperation they swore to play a big game fer to git even. They swore it shed be a game o' freeze-out 'twixt them an' you two, an' that they'd strike fust at the heart an' pocket o' Dan Brown, o' the Single Pot Ranch, the fust play."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Sol Scott.

"That afore this, Aces-and hes got Dan Brown's wife an' young-uns in his grip fer keeps!" spluttered Dough-ball Jimmy.

CHAPTER IV. THREE OF A KIND.

PERFECTLY understanding the part he was to play, Johnny's Infant, the instant his superiors assailed Mrs. Rachel Brown, made a dive and caught both Willie and Cherry, clapping a broad palm over each little pair of lips, to stifle the cries of terror which would naturally rise at the sight of their mother's peril.

His effort was successful, and pressing the children close against his knees, he watched the progress of the terribly unequal struggle going on in the center of the room.

For one moment Rachel Brown seemed paralyzed by the sudden assault, and already Aces-and was beginning to laugh over his perfect success, so much more easy than he had dared expect, when the woman made a desperate effort to escape their rude grasp, or at least to free her lips sufficiently to utter a cry for help that might reach the hired men without. One cry she knew would be sufficient, for Dan Brown had picked his men with an eye to their fighting qualities, quite as much as for their skill with horse or cloven hoof.

"Take it easy, my darling!" laughed Johnny-jump-up, shifting his fingers just enough to keep them from the white teeth that sought to close upon them. "Better a gag of this sort than a gripe on that pretty white throat of yours!"

"Shell I help, boss?" eagerly muttered Johnny's Infant.

That very eagerness bade fair to ruin their plans, for, little dreaming what a manly lad Willie was, despite his few years, the giant paid attention only to stifling the cries of the children. And then, with a bit of the spirit inherited from Dan Brown of Denver, Willie snatched a revolver from the waist above his head, and pointing it toward the villains who were abusing his mother, discharged the weapon!

"Hell's delight!" snarled Johnny-jump-up, whirling round, his fair face transformed into that of a veritable fiend, for the moment forgetting the duty assigned him.

And before Aces-and could counteract the slip, Rachel Brown gave vent to a shriek as shrill and piercing as lay within the compass of her sound lungs.

"Let my mamma go!" shouted Willie, slipping from the grasp of the stupefied giant, and cocking the revolver again. "I'll shoot you dead, you ugly, naughty man!"

The last words were blended with an explosion, and Aces-and staggered back with a howling curse of mingled pain and fury, clapping one hand to his face, down which the red blood was streaming freely.

Johnny's Infant, recovering his wits at that sight, uttered a savage oath and swung out one huge hand, striking the gallant lad on the side of the head, knocking him endlong across the room.

With a wailing cry, Rachel Brown darted forward and caught the poor little fellow from the floor, one arm clasping him tightly to her bosom while she waved the villains back with her free hand.

"Back, you heartless demons! My poor little boy! Would you murder him before his mother's eyes?"

Johnny-jump-up was the first to recover from the surprise, and with a snarling oath he leaped to the window, casting a searching look around the space thus revealed, then turning with:

"The infernal kid's done it now! The cowboys are afoot, sure, and we'll have our hands full if the boys don't close in lively!"

He leaped to the side of Aces-and, who seemed bewildered by the shock of the bullet, and snatching a whistle from where it hung by a golden chain about his neck, leaped back to the window and blew a long and shrill blast upon the instrument.

Even as he did so, he caught the sound of hasty steps, the hurried opening of a door, and then a sharp, angry cry as a stout, bare-armed servant woman paused upon the threshold. He wheeled with a savage snarl, and before the woman could advance, flee or utter a word, his armed right hand rose to send forth a spout of flame-tinged smoke.

Without a cry or groan, the poor woman dropped in her tracks, a bullet through her brain!

"Wake up, you fools!" he cried, angrily, as he leaped across the room and kicked the still quivering corpse out of the doorway. "Baby, freeze onto the woman and the kids. Knock her over if she cuts up rusty. You must hold them all three! Asa, rouse up and come with me! We've got to stand off those whelps until the lads can get here, or our game is busted wide open!"

The prompt and decisive action of his brother seemed to bring back the chief's scattered senses, and before Johnny-jump-up could leave the room, his voice rung out sharply:

"We'll play a surer game than that. Darius, fetch the woman to the door with you. Johnny, look after the kids. Ten to one the cowboys won't face the deal we can give them then!"

More from instinct than from his words, the two rascals understood the meaning of Aces-and, and lost no time in putting it into play.

Only for the intensity of her maternal love—only for poor little Willie lying in her arms so pale, so silent, so deathlike—only for her belief that he was dead, slain outright by that dastardly blow—Rachel Brown would not have been so easily overcome, for the revolver that had marked both Johnny-jump-up and Aces-and lay close beside her on the floor, and right well she knew how to use the tool.

But now, bending over her gallant little son, pressing her pale lips to his paler cheeks, sobbing and grieving as only a mother can grieve over her first-born, for the moment unconscious of all else, even unheeding the pitiful wailing of terrified Cherry, the poor woman was grasped by the hands of the giant before she could realize all that it meant.

She made little or no resistance until Johnny-jump-up caught hold of the boy and tore him from her arms. Then, a wild cry escaped her.

"My boy—my murdered child!"

"Shut clam and don't go off your nut, fool!" snarled the little ruffian, avoiding her frenzied grasp. "The kid's all right. Snatch her along after Aces, Baby. Lively, now! There's no time to lose through silly squeamishness. Lend her a rap if she won't go in quiet!"

Johnny's Infant appeared to have but one object in life: to blindly follow the instructions and wishes of the little fire-eater. He lifted his clenched fist menacingly above the white face of the woman, but fortunately for her, the blow was not needed. Her overtaken brain reeled, and she lay a lifeless weight across his arm, seeming more like a corpse than a living body.

The Infant turned an inquiring glance toward his master, but Johnny-jump-up had already left the room, carrying Willie on one arm and dragging the wailing Cherry after him. Lacking fresh orders, the Infant concluded to carry out those already received, and strode after his master to the front door, in which Aces-and already stood, swiftly taking in the scene before them.

The alarm was given, beyond a doubt. The cowboy in whose charge Johnny-jump-up so coolly left their horses, was rushing from the corral, a revolver in his hand, while his voice was lifted in a long, far-reaching yell, plainly a signal to his fellows.

Over the plain, just rising the bit of elevated ground on which we first sighted these three precious rascals, were visible a number of horsemen, riding at full speed toward the ranch. There were at least a score in the party, and a short, mocking laugh parted the lips of Aces-and as he cast a brief glance over his shoulder toward his brother and the Infant.

"There comes the rest of the deck, and—"

"Ware hawks!" hissed Johnny-jump-up, as his keen glance detected danger.

The cowboy first seen came to an abrupt halt as he caught a glimpse of the persons in the doorway, and his revolver was leaping to a level just as that warning sound caused Aces-and to turn again. His own weapon rose, but before he could touch the trigger, Johnny-jump-up slipped past him, holding the two children before him as a shield, his voice ringing out sharply:

"Here's a dainty double target, if you must shoot, Tommy! Or, if that isn't enough—Baby, fetch forth the fair dame, will you?"

Aces-and laughed maliciously as he made way for the giant who carried Rachel Brown in his arms, but then a grating oath came out as he caught sight of half a dozen men hurrying on foot from behind the nearest corral, each and every one of whom bore cocked weapons which they seemed only too eager to use.

Johnny-jump-up made the discovery at the same instant, but instead of an oath, a laugh of mockery parted his red lips.

Willie still lay senseless across his left arm, but he shifted his grasp on Cherry until his left hand grasped her by the waist, lifting her toward his breast. Then, with a bared knife clasped in his right hand, its gleaming point hovering over their helpless forms, he cried in a taunting tone of voice to the startled cowboys:

"Dip lightly, my doughty tail-twisters! Save your ammunition and keep your distance, unless you want to see a first-class specimen of fancy carving on these two sweet kids! Halt! you fools!" and his tone changed from mockery to deadly earnest, to savage threatening as the men only slackened their pace without entirely pausing. "One rod closer, and Dan Brown will have to start afresh in the family line—I swear it by all that's good and bad!"

Eager to make amends for his error of a few minutes before, the Infant duplicated the movements of his master without stopping for instructions. His long, wicked knife rose above the painfully panting bosom of Rachel Brown, and the red light that glowed in his dull eyes told how wholly he was in earnest, let the threats of Johnny-jump-up be truth or empty bluff.

Aces-and saw this, and fearing the loss of his most important card in the bold game he was playing, he sprang forward and caught the hand of the giant, hissing angrily in his ear:

"Kill her and I'll kill you, fool! Don't you see Johnny's only giving them a bluff?"

Unfortunately the cowboys did not know this, and thus they lost their one chance of turning the tables on the bold players. They believed these desperadoes would kill their captives if pressed close, and they huddled together like so many frightened sheep, for the moment wholly at a loss what to do. They lacked a leader. And while they hesitated, the horsemen from beyond the rise galloped up to the ranch.

The man in advance leaned from his saddle toward Aces-and, his dark eyes glowing with the fire of battle, as he hurriedly cried:

"Shell we take 'em in, boss? Say the word, an' we'll make the count so much the nearer even. Shell we take 'em in?"

Aces-and hesitated for a moment, but it was not through mercy for the cowboys or any other motive of humanity. He knew that in the game, the first move in which he was now making, there would be plenty of hard and deadly fighting, and to come out on top he might need every man of those with him. True, they doubled the cowboys in number, but a quick dash would carry the enemy under cover of the nearest corral, where their weapons would work havoc for a few moments. No, there was too much danger of weakening his force.

"Not in that way, Bristow," he hurriedly muttered. "We'll have to take 'em in, of course, but I reckon we hold better cards than powder and lead. We'll try them first, anyway."

With a disappointed air the big outlaw fell back, moodily sitting his horse as he awaited further orders.

"The critter's comin' to," muttered the Infant to his master, as Rachel Brown lifted her head and stared about her with a dazed air. "Shell I rock her to sleep ag'in, boss?"

"No. Let her feel her own feet, if she will. Keep fast hold of her, though, and look out that she don't play the same trick on you that this little cub did."

"My boy—my children!" gasped the poor woman; then, with a wild cry, as she caught sight of the silent figure lying on the arm of the smaller desperado, she strove to reach it, only to be jerked back by the brutal might of the giant.

"Keep her quiet, curse you!" growled Aces-and, as his keen eye noted an uneasy movement among the cowboys beyond at the cry. "And you," he cried, raising his voice until it could not be mistaken by the enemy whom he addressed, "want to keep your linen on, unless you hold a bitter, black grudge against your mistress and her kids! The first crooked play any of you try to make will rub them out of the game."

"Who and what are you anyway?" cried one of the cowboys, taking a few steps in advance of his fellows, as though assuming the command in lack of an authorized leader.

"Chiefs, each and every one of us," laughed Aces-and, pressing a handkerchief to his bleeding cheek.

The second shot fired by gallant little Willie had narrowly escaped laying the head rascal low forever. As it was, it made an ugly wound, the scar of which Aces-and would carry to the grave with him, providing fate should give him days sufficient for the wound to heal over.

"What is it you want?" again called out the cowboy.

"What we've got, mainly," mocked the desperado.

"You outnumber us two to one, but you darsn't put the lady and the children to one side and meet us like white men!"

During this brief interchange of words, Rachel Brown was rapidly recovering both her strength and her natural bravery. That she was not lacking in this, those who have read the preceding volumes of this series do not require telling. Naturally brave and self-reliant, her union with Dan Brown of Denver had only deepened and strengthened this quality, and now, feeling how much depended on her, in the absence of her husband, she strove to crush down her maternal fears and act as he would have her act in this dire emergency.

She recognized the cowboy who had taken on himself the position of spokesman, and knew him for a bold, true-hearted servant, who would at any time risk his life for Dan Brown or any of his family. She saw that there was naught to hope for from a pitched battle with the great odds in favor of the outlaws. There was only a hope for the future, and this she eagerly grasped at, crying out clear and distinct:

"Mark Hopkins! flee—carry word to Dan Brown!"

She dared not be more explicit, lest her speech should be cut short before she could convey to him the essential part; but he was cool and quick-witted, and would readily comprehend all she would have said.

An angry snarl broke from the lips of the outlaw chief, and Johnny-jump-up grated sharply to the Infant:

"Choke her short off, you idiot!"

Baby obeyed, but the harm was done. With a cheering shout, Mark Hopkins waved one hand in token of understanding, then turned and leaped toward the sheltering corral.

But swift as was his action, the hand, eye,

weapon of Johnny-jump-up was still swifter, and as the revolver exploded, the unfortunate cowboy fell headlong, dead ere his body measured its own length on the ground.

The surviving cowboys shrunk back, seemingly on the point of breaking and seeking cover, but the clear voice of Aces-and rung out:

"Hold! keep your places, or by all that's evil! your mistress and her kids shall be butchered before your very eyes! That's business!"

"He lies!" cried Rachel, breaking from the grasp of the sluggish giant, and rapidly continuing: "Go—find your master and tell him all! They dare not harm us, for fear of—"

Again she was caught in the mighty arms of the Infant, who was terribly wrought up by his repeated blunders or mishaps. Only for the warning voice of Johnny-jump-up, low but stern, Rachel Brown would have fared ill at his hands just then.

"Try it on, if you want to sup sorrow!" cried Aces-and, with a wave of his hand toward his still mounted men. "Try it on, and not only will these helpless ones suffer, but I'll turn my bully boys loose to lap blood until your veins run dry! I say it, and I am Aces-and!"

"And I'm Johnny-jump-up!"

"And I'm Johnny's Infant!" roared the colossus.

"An' hyar's the rest o' the deck, each an' every one a ace o' trumps!" chimed in burly Dave Bristow.

The cowboys wavered and seemed undecided what to do or how to act in this emergency. The only one among their number who was fitted by nature or education to take part as leader, lay dead at their feet. Any one of them was bold enough. Could fight when only plain fighting lay before them, and fight to the death without stopping to count the odds. But with death menacing their mistress and her children, they dared not open fire, dared not break in flight, even though she had bidden them do so the more surely to carry the news to Dan Brown. And so, not knowing what else to do, they huddled together, weapons in hand, still dangerous if crowded too close, but not if handled aright.

And Aces-and believed he could manage them without firing another shot.

"Any other among you want a card of the same color?" he cried, tauntingly, his weapon at a level. "Don't be backward about coming forward, if you do. We're the most accommodating sort of fellows you ever run across, and can fit any one in the lot with a through ticket. Up with your hands, and empty, you curs!" he added, with abrupt savageness that seemed to startle the cowboys almost as much as would have done a thunderbolt had it dropped in their midst.

At a motion from him, those glittering knives once more hung over the helpless captives, while the horsemen tightened their reins and held themselves ready for a sudden dash.

Sharp and stern Aces-and added:

"Throw down your weapons and elevate your hands! The man who hesitates dies like that dog lying at your feet! And more—if one of you all tries to shoot or to run, that move seals the fate of all Dan Brown loves dearest on this earth! Once more—hands up and empty!"

It was a bitter pill, but there was no means of evading it. With sullen curses, deep but none the less bitter, the cowboys obeyed. Their weapons fell to the ground, undischarged, and their hands were held up at full length above their heads. Aces-and nodded to his men, and then strode forward, a cocked revolver in each hand, covering the cowboys.

Under his supervision they were wholly disarmed, then bound hand and foot and piled against the base of the nearest corral, with little care for their comfort. Then the outlaw chief retraced his steps, a hard, exultant smile playing about his bearded lips.

At a sign from him, the Infant released Rachel Brown, and Johnny-jump-up permitted her to take possession of the children, Cherry still sobbing with fright, Willie just beginning to show signs of returning consciousness. And, oh! how tenderly the mother pressed her pale and quivering lips to the bruised and swollen cheek where that brutal blow had alighted! He was her hero!

Aces-and laughed malignantly as he noticed this.

"If Dan Brown only loves the spunky little kid equal to you, my beauty, I'll ask no better revenge!"

"What has my husband done to you?" demanded Rachel, turning upon him with flashing eyes.

"Nothing much—a mere trifle," mocked the villain, but with an angry, evil glow in his black eyes that flatly contradicted his words. "Only ruined my business. Butchered my servants. Robbed me of my hard won gold. Hunted me from pillar to post until in my desperation I turn to give him a little taste of his own medicine!"

"And show your bravery and nobleness by assaulting a poor woman and two helpless babes!"

Aces-and tapped his wounded cheek with one finger.

"That looks like the work of a helpless babe, don't it?"

"Next time I'll shoot straighter!" uttered a faint but undaunted voice, as Willie lifted his curly head from his mother's bosom, his eyes flashing defiance into the face of the outlaw.

Quickly Rachel pressed his head to her bosom again, her momentarily flushed cheeks paling as she feared for her daring lad. But Aces-and only laughed hardly as he read her fears aright.

"Let him crow while he can, the dainty little bantam! It may not be for so long, unless—"

"Unless what?" demanded the mother, apprehensively.

"Unless his father meets me on my own ground and at my own figures," was the quick response. "Be sure I'm not taking all this trouble for nothing. It's a big game we're playing, and this is our first move. We mean to strike Dan Brown as hard as he has ever struck us—ay! a thousand times harder!"

"And we? These poor, innocent children?"

"Are our best cards," laughed the gambler. "It's a game of freeze-out with Dan Brown and Sol Scott against our crowd."

"Spare my children! Do with me as you will, but spare them!" and Rachel Brown fell on her knees at the feet of the evil man.

CHAPTER V.

OUT OF THE GAME FOR GOOD.

If Dough-ball Jimmy had been seeking a sensation from the first, he could not have chosen his words better, even though they were but little more than a repetition of those he had whined forth before. For now, somehow, every one who heard him seemed to be convinced that he was uttering naught but the plain, earnest truth.

A muttering sound ran through the circle of cowboys, and the prisoner glanced apprehensively in that direction, but his worst danger lay not in that quarter.

Sol Scott frowned darkly, the anxious light deepening in his eyes.

For a single breath Dan Brown of Denver stood silent and motionless, as though suddenly turned to stone by the revelation, then a low, grating cry escaped his lips, and leaping forward, one strong hand clutched Dough-ball by the throat. A revolver-muzzle pressed against the flesh between his eyes. Those blue orbs glowed with a deadly fire as they stared into his bloodshot eyes, and the tones of the Rocky Mountain detective quavered with savage fury and strong dread:

"Out with it, curse you! The whole truth, or off goes your head!"

At that moment Dan Brown was little better than a madman. Even his brother detective had never seen him so thoroughly "off his base," though he could readily understand how this came about, as has been partially explained. He saw, what Dan Brown apparently had no realization of, that Dough-ball Jimmy was unable to speak, owing to that deadly gripe upon his throat. He saw that Dan Brown was just mad enough to put his threats into execution without hesitation, and knowing that it was all-important that the rascal should speak out clearly and to the point, for the second time that evening he interposed and snatched the prey from the iron grasp of his brother detective.

A swift stride, a deft grasp, and the hammer of the revolver fell harmless on his hand instead of the cartridge.

Dan Brown whirled upon him with a savage snarl, but his uplifted hand never fell as intended, though Sol Scott made no effort to evade or check the threatened blow. His gaze caught and held the half-insane glare of the detective, almost instantly bringing a return of reason.

"You're choking him so he can't speak, pard. Leave him to me, won't you? I'll get at the bottom facts as quickly as possible."

A flush swept over the face of the other, and without a word he freed the half-suffocated horse-thief, falling back a pace, his revolver returned to his belt, his arms tightly folded across his heaving chest, as though to lock his fierce passions in.

Sol Scott cast the noose from the neck of the prisoner, leading him a few paces apart, and gently pushing him against the leaning trunk of a tree, where his trembling frame might receive a little much-needed support. He held a brandy-flask to the parched and bleeding lips, and the eagerness with which Dough-ball Jimmy clung to the bottle told how grateful was the boon just then.

Only sufficient to moisten his lips and throat, not enough to thicken his speech or to lend him "Dutch courage." Then Sol Scott removed the flask from the clinging lips, and with his knife cut the rawhide thongs that held the hands of Dough-ball Jimmy behind his back.

"Take that as an earnest of your reward, if you can talk to the point and the purpose, Jimmy," the detective uttered in his clearest tones, for he began to fear that the poor devil had received treatment rough enough to unsettle his never too solid brains.

"You're white—clean white—an' I'll never

fergit that!" he mumbled, trying to catch Sol Scott's hand with his trembling fingers, only to find himself foiled.

"None of that whining cant, Jimmy," came the sharp retort. "If you thought you could make a dollar by it, you wouldn't stop to think twice before letting a knife into my carcass."

"Deed I never—"

"Let it go at that, I tell you, Jimmy. It's business now. What did you mean by what you said a bit ago? What devil's work is Aces-and and his evil pack up to now? Out with it, if you love your life!"

"I'll tell you," mumbled the rascal, with a covert glance toward the dark face of Dan Brown. "I'll tell you, fer you've treated me nigher white then anybody else this month o' Sundays!"

"Tell me, then," with a frown, his blue eyes beginning to glow and glitter. "Don't make me replace that noose as a tongue-quickener, or I'd hate to insure your neck! Begin at the beginning, and tell it all in the fewest possible words. Time, Jimmy!"

"It's jes' as I tole him, a bit ago," muttered Dough-ball, with a sullen, half-vicious nod toward Dan Brown of Denver. "Aces-and knowed you fellers hed dropped onto his secrots an' was drawin' in on him. He knowed his 'riginal game was ruined in these parts, an' that he'd be grinnin' through the loop of a lariat afore long ef he didn't either levant or git a foul grip onto you two critters."

"Then his new game included me as well?" demanded Sol Scott, the stern lines deepening around his mouth, the fire growing deeper in his blue eyes as his mind flashed across the miles of prairie which lay between him and his precious ones. "You only mentioned the family of Dan Brown at first."

There was a warning in those tones that Dough-ball Jimmy could not miss. He was recovering his mental powers sufficiently to realize that, softly as this man spoke, he was to the full as dangerous to trifle with as Dan Brown himself.

"I hearn 'em use your name, but it wasn't jes' like they did that o' your pard. They seemed to look on him as the wu'st one they'd hev to han'le, an' to sot the biggest blame ag'in' him fer breakin' up the trade."

"They haven't learned the worst of me yet!" harshly uttered Dan Brown, with a smile that caused Dough-ball to shiver as though an icy douche had suddenly broken loose over his head.

"Spur him up, Scott!"

At the first sound of his pard's voice, Sol Scott turned quickly in that direction, fearing another mad outburst, but he drew a breath of relief as he saw those cold, composed features. Dan Brown was waking up and getting to be more like his wonted self.

His strong right hand clasped that of his mate, and he whispered:

"The more haste the less speed, this time, pard. The rascal was never any too smart, and he has been frightened out of even that scant supply of wits. He's coming 'round, and will soon rattle his tongue glibly enough, never fear!"

"It's all a lie—it must be! But spur him on, old friend!"

So the lips of Dan Brown uttered, but in his heart he felt that the words of the horse-thief were only too surely founded on fact. Worn and weary, almost broken down with hard work and loss of rest, the detective was in just the right condition to accept an omen or premonition without question or investigation.

He seemed to hear the voices of his loved wife and idolized children calling to him, begging him to rescue them from some terrible peril. He could hardly resist the mad impulse to leap upon that dirty, ragged, disreputable-looking wretch who so painfully drew out his words, and tear the truth from his tongue at a single grip; but the calming influence of his brother detective luckily kept him from that madness.

"Go on, Jimmy. Strike the trail at the beginning, and keep close to it if you love your precious neck. For the last time, open up."

Sol Scott spoke quietly enough, but as he stood in front of the horse-thief, his fingers were busied in making the slip-noose run more freely. It was a silent but terribly eloquent reminder, and with a haste that was almost ludicrous, Dough-ball Jimmy spoke again:

"You know the gang, boss. You know what work they've bin doin'. You hunted 'em so almighty close an' hard that they hed to do some-thin' an' that mighty quick! So Aces-and he called 'em all together an' opened up a plan that he said would make 'em come out heap more'n even with the game, ef it didn't fizzle out."

"An' that plan, Jimmy? Get down to it as soon as you can, please."

"I jes' ketched the shadder of it, boss, an—"

"Careful, Jimmy!"

"Deed I'm givin' it to ye straight as a bee-line, boss," was the eager response to this warning. "You saved my life when it was jes' goin' out onder that grip—why shouldn't I tell you the honest truth?"

"You would be a miserable idiot to do otherwise, Jimmy, but lying comes so natural to

men of your caliber, that it's mighty hard to keep to a straight trail, even when sudden death lies close on either hand; as it does right now, Jimmy."

"Don't I know it, boss? Ain't I talkin' fer life, now?" whined the miserable wretch, fawningly.

"See that you don't forget that guide-board, then, Jimmy. Go on."

"On'y that much did the boss tell the hull gang, then he turned us out while he talked his plans over more perticklar with Johnny-jump-up an' that over-grown critter they call Johnny's Infant."

"And you played the eavesdropper of course Jimmy?"

Dough-ball grinned after a sickly fashion.

"That's what Aces-and paid me fer, mostly, boss. He tuck me as a sort o' scout an' spy an' crawler, like. It was second natur', like, that made me try fer to hear them talk over the game, an' it's lucky fer us all here that I done it, too!"

"I can judge that better after I hear what you discovered. Will you go on?" and there was a trace of growing impatience in the tones of the detective that acted as a spur to the horse-thief.

"They was talkin' 'bout Dan Brown when I got whar I could ketch onto tha'r talk, boss. They was cussin' him up hill an' down, layin' all the blame onto his shoulders, an' swarin' fer to git even ef it tuck a lifetime. Ye see, I didn't hear the fu'st, nur yit the last of it, but from what I did hear I made out this much:

"They was goin' to play a big game of freeze-out. The fu'st keerds they was goin' fer was the fambly o' Dan Brown. With them in tha'r han's, Aces-and said they could sweep the board."

"What were they going to do with them?" demanded Sol Scott, one strong hand catching hold of Dan Brown as he started forward.

"Speak quick, or salt won't save you."

"Make Dan Brown pay through the nose fer 'em, Aces-and said," the cowering horse-thief spluttered, casting a shy glance around him like one who meditated safety in flight.

"How were they to get possession of them? When?"

"I cain't say fer sure, sence I hed to skin out o' that in a hurry; but I do know that the boss, Johnny-jump-up, the Infant, an' nigh all o' the gang hes gone off somewhars."

"Leaving you behind?"

"Me an' two others, to watch on you-'uns. Ef you turned head to'rds home, we was to break-neck but what we kep' ahead o' you with the word. We was to make straight fer the Single Pot Ranch. Ef we didn't run on the gang by that, we was free to look out fer our own necks."

"You didn't hear my—nothing mentioned about my family then?"

Slowly, calmly Sol Scott pronounced these words, but his calmness was only outward. Beneath that cold exterior were wildly conflicting passions.

He saw his own wife, his only child, but an infant. So few miles separated his ranch from that of his brother detective! And he felt that he must be hated almost as intensely as Dan Brown by the gang of outlaws and robbers whom he had hunted so relentlessly. Surely they would not miss such a chance to strike him a blow similar to the one this rascal admitted they had planned against the owner of Single Pot Ranch? If they should—if they had!

It was a soul-sickening dread that assailed him, and for an instant one hand sought his throat, tearing open the loose collar as if it was choking him. And as Dan Brown saw this—as he interpreted that ghastly pallor aright, his strong hand clasped that of his mate, and in turn he uttered comforting and strengthening words:

"It's not too late yet, pard, never fear! We'll get there in time, if we set to work at once. Cheer up, old fellow—never say die!"

Hoarsely and forced came the words, but they served their purpose. With an effort Sol Scott flung off that momentary stupor, and cried:

"Look to the horses—get a remount from these fellows. I'll send up the sign for the boys. And then—to save, or—*avenge!*"

Thoroughly aroused now, Dan Brown glanced rapidly over the horses on which the cowboys were mounted, taking in their good points with the eye of a born jockey. In less than a minute he had selected the ones that instinct told him could best be depended upon, and he said:

"I want these nags—must have them! Name your own price, and I'll double it."

"But it'll leave us afoot, boss!" muttered one of the men, like all men born to the saddle feeling helpless at the bare idea of having to depend on his own legs for means of locomotion.

"I must have them," repeated Dan Brown, his eyes all aglow, his right hand on a revolver. "If you won't sell them, I'll take them. I don't want to kill you but I'll do it without a second thought, if you refuse to give way."

Cold and even were his tones, but those who listened and looked into his white, drawn countenance just then, knew he meant every syllable he uttered.

"Double, treble, ten-fold your price, I tell you!" he added, with a trace of deadly impatience in his voice that acted like a spur.

"They're yourn, boss," cried one of the cowboys, leaping to the ground and resigning his animal. "We'll settle the price when we meet the next time. I ain't a hog, ef I do grunt once in a while."

"Same here," echoed the other man, as he resigned his mount, but with a loving, lingering touch of one hand that only a true horseman could understand. "Treat him the best you kin a'ford, boss, fer he's as good as they ever make 'em, he is!"

"Would ye?" snarled the first cowboy, making a sudden dive into the underbrush in pursuit of Dough-ball Jimmy, who had taken advantage of this episode to steal away, as he thought, unobserved. "Would ye, you durned sarpiant? Not much ye don't!"

But Dough-ball evaded his grasp, and knowing that his newborn hope was in vain, he turned and leaped to the side of Dan Brown, clasping him with trembling arms as he spluttered:

"You swore you'd set me free, boss! Don't leave me with—"

His speech was cut short by a swift stroke of a fist that sent him reeling back into the brush. Dan Brown had thoughts only for his imperiled dear ones, and freed himself of this reptile without even hearing his imploring words.

Bill Hampton interchanged swift and meaning glances with his men, and the twain on foot as quickly pounced upon Dough-ball Jimmy, hauling him completely under cover, holding his limbs motionless, his lips closed by a broad palm.

Sol Scott, immediately after uttering that hasty speech, strode out of the motte and began tearing up a quantity of the sun-cured grass, placing it in a little pile before him. Kneeling, he struck a match and ignited the heap, then took a paper package from his breast. Opening this, he dropped a pinch of its contents on the blaze, when a dense puff of black smoke rolled up past his face, soaring aloft like a slowly increasing ball. In rapid succession he repeated the action, until at least a dozen of the black balls floated in the air, rising higher and higher, each one retaining its globular shape and density.

One swift, keen glance he cast around the horizon, but it was purely mechanical, for he could not expect to behold an answer to his signal as yet. Then he retraced his steps to the motte, entering the little cleared space just after Dough-ball Jimmy was hurled into the bushes by that terrible blow from the fist of Dan Brown.

He never missed the horse-thief. Though he had showed it less outwardly, his anxiety and fears for the safety of his loved ones had been no less acute than those that assailed his brother detective, and he had thoughts for nothing else just then.

He approached Bill Hampton, not noticing the confusion imprinted on that worthy's face, and thrusting the paper package into his hand, together with a number of gold coins, hurriedly uttering:

"Keep a fire going outside the timber, and send up a ball of smoke every few seconds with this powder. Keep on until the signal is answered—until those who answer it meet you here. Say you will? More than life may depend on it!"

"I'll do it ef it takes a month, pard," was the quick response.

Bill Hampton meant it, too, although the response was mainly prompted by a feverish wish to hurry the detectives away before either of them should remember the existence of Dough-ball Jimmy.

"I ask it for the sake of women and children, man!" hoarsely added the detective, a momentary dimness coming over his blue eyes. "It's to call in our pards, and when they come, tell them what has happened. Give them fresh mounts if they need them, and send them on to our ranches. I'll make your loss good, if it beggars me!"

"That's all right, pard," was the cheerful reply. "But how'm I to know it's the right critters as comes? Mebbe some o' the gang may try fer to play roots onto us?"

Sol Scott drew a curiously marked bit of ivory from his pocket and thrust it into the cowboy's hand, adding:

"Show them this, and ask their names. If they say either Enoch Dodge, Nor' West Nick or Turk Elder, they're all right. Send them after us, and bid them spare neither man nor horse-flesh! You will?"

"Sart'in, pard, an' good luck go with ye, too! Mebbe we'll j'ine in, ef you wouldn't think it too crowdin'?"

"Furnish them with a fresh or extra mount, and we'll ask nothing more of you," was the hurried reply as the voice of Dan Brown rung out in sharp impatience:

"To saddle, mate! It's for more than life, now, and a minute lost may mean worse than death for our loved ones!"

Even as he spoke he leaped into the saddle and dashed out of the timber, leading his extra horse. And close upon his heels thundered Sol Scott,

never giving a thought to luckless Dough-ball Jimmy!

"Hold your breath, critters!" hissed Bill Hampton, an unholy light leaping into his eyes as he watched the two detectives speeding away. "Don't breathe crossways fer fear that feller 'll think to 'member his word to Dough-ball Jimmy!"

"He wouldn't turn back now, ef he did!"

"Don't you fool yourself, boy," was the muttered retort. "Ef they was twicet as much at stake, Sol Scott wouldn't let his word go bu'st ef he thought of it. It'll cut him mighty deep ef he ever comes to find out what raally came to Dough-ball!"

"We'll never tell," laughed one of the party.

"Nur I don't reckon Dough-ball ever will," added another, with a low, reckless laugh.

Hampton said nothing, watching in silence the rapidly disappearing horsemen through the growing shades of evening. Not until they had completely vanished from view did he draw a full breath. Then, with a hard, reckless laugh he cried aloud:

"Fetch out the critter, boys, an' let him look his last on this world, while I send up them smoke-balls while they's light enough fer a critter to sight 'em. A promise is a promise, with us, anyway, ef Sol Scott hes fergot all about his'n!"

Trembling, moaning, piteously begging for life, Dough-ball Jimmy was hauled out into the clear space, and there brutally baited and badgered by the cowboys while Bill Hampton saw to sending up more smoke signals.

Not a little to that worthy's astonishment, he beheld the balls of smoke, so black while the clear light of day lasted, take on a luminous appearance as the shades of evening deepened. He regarded the powder with feelings something akin to awe, but faithfully kept up the ceremony with brief intervals during which he joined the cowboys in their clumsy sport.

Then, tiring of this sport, and at length feeling certain that Sol Scott had not recalled his promise to Dough-ball Jimmy, or if he had, that he would not lose so much precious time as it would cost to turn back to remedy his unfortunate oversight, Bill Hampton spoke up:

"We didn't make no promise, did we, pards?"

A chorus of negatives effectually drowned the husky prayers of the doomed horse-thief. Not one voice was uplifted in his favor.

"Cept when we swore to hang the fu'st horse-thief we froze onto," amended the leader of the little band. "That was swore to. Dough-ball is the fu'st hoss-thief we've met. He's a rope, thar's a tree, an' we've got han's fer to do the pullin'. It ain't white to go back onto a oath sech as we tuck, pards! We're white, so—"

No need to finish the sentence. No need to detail what followed. Enough that prayers and pleadings availed naught. Enough that as the shadows deepened, one player was "froze out" of the big game forever!

CHAPTER VI.

ACES-AND STOCKS THE CARDS.

PLEADING for her children as she would never have condescended to plead for herself, Rachel Brown knelt at the feet of the gambler chief amid the rude, yet subdued laughter of the evil gang. And more devilish than all the rest came the voice of their master.

"Spare them?" he echoed, showing his teeth with a savage smile that sent the blood chilling back to the heart of the poor mother. "Spare them or you? Ay! just as Dan Brown has spared us! No more—no less!"

"At least, *they* have not harmed you," she faltered, still kneeling, still forcing herself to hope against hope, still thinking to save the little ones who were dearer far to her heart than her own life.

Aces-and laughed as he again touched his bullet-marked cheek.

Her cheek flushed briefly, and her dark eyes filled with fire.

"A child—a baby—and you hold so savage a grudge against him for trying in his poor, feeble way, to defend the mother that gave him birth? Rather, you should glory that he belongs to the same sex—the sex which you are so basely shaming."

And then, fearing she had spoken too sharply for prudence, Rachel Brown drew the curly head closer to her palpitating bosom, ready to shield him with her own life if need be.

And Willie, gallant little hero that he was, clung to her neck with his chubby arms, flashing a look of defiance over his shoulder at the outlaw as he sturdily cried:

"You're a bad, ugly man, to make my mamma cry, and I'll kill you when I grow up big enough—I will!"

"Hush, Willie, mamma's little man," murmured Rachel, pressing his poor bruised face into her bosom, with an apprehensive glance toward Asa Sand. "The bad man might hurt you if you talk so loud."

"Then papa'll whip him—whip the bad man 'at hit Willie—whip 'em all, till they go dead all over!"

Johnny-jump-up laughed softly as he stood patient beneath the slow but gentle and loving

hands of his Infant, who was looking after the injury inflicted by the lad's first shot. This was but trifling in its nature, Willie's will having far out-paced his skill with the pistol. A flesh wound in the shoulder; two holes in one, as Johnny's Infant expressed it, greatly to his own relief.

"No out-cross there, Aces," the little desperado uttered, nodding his head meaningly. "Dan Brown in miniature, sure enough!"

"And I'm glad of it," was the response. "He'll make so much the surer card for us to play in our little game. Live-stock is rising, and Dan Brown will be a few more ducats poorer for this little circus with his hopeful son and heir as clown."

"We can't do more than skin him clean, and that we agreed to do before dealing the first hand 'round," laughed Johnny-jump-up, yet casting a glance that was almost admiring upon the lad. "Pity he belongs to that infernal bloodhound! He'd make a rare 'un with the proper care and training. I'd like just such another to bring up after my own notions. Wouldn't I make a chief out of the little rascal, though?"

"He'll never live to wear gray hairs," muttered Aces-and, one hand mechanically going up to his bullet-pierced cheek as a fresh twinge of pain affected it.

Johnny-jump-up noticed the action, and a graver expression came over his handsome face. Busied with their desperate game until now, he had hardly time to remember the fact of his brother's being shot, but now an anxious light filled his eyes and he stepped forward to the other's side. A glance showed him that there was little to fear, however, and he gave a breath of relief that showed how close was the bond which united the brothers; all the closer, perhaps, from the knowledge that they stood Ishmaelites in the land, with the hands of all honest men turned against them.

"A little deeper in the meat than my scratch, Aces, but nothing to go into mourning over, I reckon. Still, you don't want to neglect it too long. Go inside and let the Infant patch you up for the time being."

"I will. Tell the boys to keep an eye on the rascals over yonder, and to look out for breakers. You bring in the woman and her kids. I want them where I can keep my eye on them!"

Rachel Brown dared not hesitate to obey the mock polite request of Johnny-jump-up. She had her children to think of, and her old brave will was greatly weakened by those precious charges.

With mock ceremony Johnny-jump-up ushered her into the parlor, the threshold of which showed red with the life-blood of the poor servant who had, regardless of self, rushed to the assistance of her mistress at the first alarm. Rachel shivered and a tear dimmed her eyes as she noted this. She almost broke down, and only the thought of her children prevented. For their sake she must hold out.

Johnny's Infant busied himself over the wounded chief, showing a natural skill as surgeon hardly to be expected in one of his mental caliber.

While the giant was thus engaged, Aces-and was busily thinking, his glowing eyes and corrugated brows betraying how intently. And when Johnny's Infant put the finishing touch to the strips of court-plaster, drawing back to view the effect of his handiwork, the outlaw chief rose and shook himself, once more all alive and living in the present.

"Baby, you will keep the door and see that no one intrudes. Johnny will have an eye to the window. And you, Mrs. Brown, will please lend me your ears for a brief space."

Pale, fearing the worst, she bowed slightly. She knew that she could only submit.

Aces-and rested one hip carelessly upon the center table, his free foot swinging lightly to and fro, his black eyes resting steadily on the pale face of the woman who sat opposite, as though he wished to closely observe the effect of each word as uttered.

"You have seen enough, Mrs. Brown, to feel assured that we are here to-day on no ordinary mission of plunder, that we are not common thieves. Indeed, though you may not as yet fully realize the fact, we are not thieves at all."

He paused, but if he expected a reply or retort, he was disappointed. Rachel remembered how much might depend on her prudence, and simply bowed her head in a non-committal manner.

"A model, if not a woman," with a mocking bow. "Well, we won't quarrel on that point, for of all things I detest an idly wagging tongue in a woman."

"Come down to business, Aces!" muttered Johnny-jump-up. "Talk is good enough in its proper place, but a wise man lets his cards do the speaking in a big game."

"Business it is! And first, Mrs. Dan Brown, let me repeat: We belong to the crowd your husband has gone out of his way to hunt down to death by the rope route. We didn't trouble him nor his. We worked a range many miles from him, and so long as he held his hand, we were content not to chip in against him."

"You knew what he did. He not only took

the field against us, with Sol Scott, but he sent off for other bloodhounds and swore to never rest until he had swept us from off the face of the earth! You know this?"

"It was his sworn duty," slowly, replied Rachel, seeing that Aces-and was determined to wrest an answer of some sort from her.

"How do you make that out, pray?"

"He had not resigned his commission as detective, though I hoped he would do so ere long. There came a call, and he had to obey."

"And a terrible strain on his conscience it proved, no doubt!" the outlaw sneered, with a savage smile. "How he pitied us poor devils! What bitter anguish was his whenever he sent one of our number to languish his few days out in prison! When the lynchers broke open the bars and hung the poor devils to the nearest tree or sign-post, how sincerely Dan Brown lamented—what prayers for pity and forgiveness he sent up on high! How—bah!" with a short, harsh laugh.

"You know better, even as we know better. You know that Dan Brown has proved himself the worst and deadliest bloodhound mortal man ever had on his track!"

"He has simply performed his sworn duty," with a flash of spirit.

"Let it go at that, if you prefer," returned Aces-and, suddenly resuming his cold, hard demeanor at a warning glance from Johnny-jump-up. "The past is past, and it's a poor gambler who grieves over a bad deal while he has the deck in his hands for a fresh one."

"Dan Brown and his brother hounds hit us mighty hard, but we had grit enough left to rally for a fresh game. That game has opened to-day and it will end only with our death or a straight victory."

"Boil it down, Aces!" muttered Johnny-jump-up, shortly.

"It's a game of freeze-out we are playing now, and in you and your two kids we hold three of the best cards in the deck. So long as you behave yourself and don't crowd us too hard, no harm shall come to you or the little ones. We hold them and you the better to bluff Dan Brown and bring him down to our limit. You three—and when we draw two more of the same sort, we'll hold a royal flush! Understand?"

If so, Rachel gave no sign. Cherry, less bold than her brother, was beginning to cry again, frightened by the rough men present. Rachel bent over the child, softly soothing her as best she could.

The eyes of Aces-and glowed vividly, and he made a quick signal with one hand which the Infant promptly acted upon. One great stride carried him from the door to the side of the mother, and before she could divine his purpose, his strong hands tore Willie from her arms, holding the struggling child at arm's length above his head as the half-distracted woman strove to rescue him. And then the voice of Aces-and rung out clear and sharp:

"No harm shall come to the kid, I repeat, unless you raise too big a row, you fool! Don't you understand that he is worth far more to us alive and sound in wind and limb than dead? Dan Brown will pay more for him living than dead. You know that, and so do we. Sit down—sit down and listen to what you have to do for us."

"If she don't, work the lad, Baby," cried out Johnny-jump-up.

"Spare him—I will be calm—I will obey!" gasped the tortured mother, sinking back into her chair, clasping wailing Cherry tightly to her bosom, but with wet eyes fixed on her darling boy.

The Infant lowered Willie, grasping both hands in one of his, tucking the lad under his arm, holding him helpless.

"Stop your sniveling and look at me, my dear," resumed Aces-and in a cold, smooth tone.

Rachel Brown obeyed, so far as glancing in his direction, but the hot tears so dimmed her vision that naught but a shapeless blur was to be seen. Still, Aces-and was content, and added:

"We lack two more cards of having an invincible hand. Those two cards you must assist us in drawing. They are Mrs. Sol Scott and her kid. Will you do it?"

Rachel shivered, but made no reply.

"You won't speak?" sharply demanded Aces-and.

"Spare me—don't force me to betray my best friend!"

Johnny-jump-up caught up a small rawhide whip that lay on the floor near the window, and tossed it over to the Infant, whose free hand caught it deftly, a broad grin overspreading his sleepy face.

"Tune the kid up a bit, Baby," the little villain said, shortly.

There was no need of his speaking any plainer. The Infant laid all his blunders or mishaps that day on the shoulders of Willie Brown, and now, holding the struggling lad by the collar, he plied the whip with a brutal malignancy rarely seen in one of his vast proportions. One involuntary cry of pain was all that broke from the brave boy's lips. He saw his mother flinch and utter a wild wail—saw Aces-and spring before her as she started toward him checking her with a rude grasp—and lest her punishment

should be the greater, he clinched his teeth and bore the pain without a sound.

"Devils!" gasped the tortured mother almost wild with grief and indignation. "Have you no mercy? Lash me, not that poor child!"

Aces-and lifted his hand and the Infant sullenly held his hand in obedience.

"Thank your own stubbornness if the boy has his tender hide ruffled a bit," coldly uttered Asa Sand. "You refuse to—"

"I yield—I will do or say anything, just so you spare my poor, innocent, helpless babes!" moaned Rachel, her brain reeling, her limbs trembling and refusing to support her longer.

Aces-and lowered her into a chair, and turned toward Johnny-jump-up, who glided to the table, placing thereon pen, ink and a slip of paper, with all of which he had evidently come provided. He rolled the table in front of Rachel, saying shortly:

"Boil it down, Aces. We can't afford to waste too much time. Make her understand that every hitch on her part will end in pair to the youngster, and I reckon it'll all go off right."

Aces-and promptly acted on this advice. He tapped Mrs. Brown on the shoulder, then thrust the pen into her hand.

"What do you wish me to write?" she asked.

"A note to your friend, Mrs. Sol Scott," replied Aces-and.

"What lies am I to tell her?"

"That you wish her to ride over with her child to pass the night with you. Hint, but don't say in so many words, that you have received news from her husband. That will bring her, hot-foot, I reckon, or she's no true wife," laughed the cunning villain, rubbing his hands with delight at his own adroit plotting.

"That you may have no excuse for abusing my poor boy, tell me word for word what to write," added Rachel, with a strangely cold and composed tone of voice.

With a frown, Aces-and obeyed, and as the words fell from his lips, they were faithfully written down by Rachel Brown. When he ended, she signed her name to the note, pushing it across the table for inspection.

Aces-and read it twice over, so suspicious had he become of this icily calm woman, but if it contained aught to his injury, he failed to make the discovery. He walked to the window with Johnny-jump-up, and after the smaller desperado read the note, they conversed for a brief space in low and guarded tones.

"You can depend on me," John Sand said, then thrust the note into his bosom and leaped out at the window.

Aces-and watched him until he saw him take horse and ride rapidly away, followed by several of the band. Then he turned again to Rachel Brown, who still sat at the table, soothing her child.

"So far, so good, my beauty! And now for another bit of writing, if you will be so agreeable. If not—well, the Infant looks as though he would like nothing better than to flay your hopeful kid alive by inches! Of course you will not drive him to such extremities?"

"Spare me your taunts, if you have a spark of decency left in your composition. I am wholly in your power, and for the sake of my children I will do what you ask. Were only my own life at stake, I would defy you to the bitter end!"

"I'm not caring just what motives guide you, my dear," was the rude retort. "All I want is for you to obey, promptly. I want you to take your pen in hand and inform your highly-respected husband that sundry important events have transpired at Single Pot Ranch this day."

He broke off with a low laugh as Rachel Brown looked swiftly up into his mocking face, but quickly added:

"I'm giving it to you straight as a string, my dear madam. I'm not going to hide my light under a bushel. I've made my first play in the big game of freeze-out, and it's Dan Brown's turn next."

"And you expect me to help you against him, my husband?"

"Not a bit of it, my dear," was the cool retort. "I simply give you permission to write out the events of this afternoon, and I pledge you my word as a rascal that the paper shall reach the hands of Dan Brown without a word being altered or added to it. And still you are not satisfied? Listen, once more:

"I leave this ranch within the hour. You and the kids go with me, to be held for ransom. The sooner Dan Brown understands the exact game I am playing, the sooner will you be restored to him, safe and sound. It is for this purpose I bid you write him a note. Write it you must, or the Infant can bring his little persuader into play again. Which?"

While he was talking, Rachel was thinking. She shivered as he declared his purpose of taking them away with him, though she had anticipated no less from the start. And then, as he ceased speaking with that blunt query, she spoke:

"I will write, and set down naught but the plain truth, if I may."

"That is precisely what I want. Let Dan Brown know just how the cards run at present."

Tell him that you three, with Sol Scott's wife and kid, make up a royal flush for him to draw against."

Rachel made no reply, but drew a sheet of paper from the drawer in the table before her, a bright, burning light filling her eyes as the pen ran swiftly to and fro, telling the whole black story. And as she neared the bottom of the sheet, Aces-and, looking over her shoulder, uttered a grim laugh of pleasure as he cried:

"That's right, my dear! Make it strong—pour in the poison! I want it to sting the bloodhound to the very core of his heart! Ha!"

With a sharp cry Rachel caught up the paper and was about to tear it to bits, when it was snatched from her fingers by Aces-and.

"No, you don't, my beauty!" he cried, malignantly, holding the paper beyond her grasp. "It will cut the bloodhound to the very heart, and all the deeper for its breaking off so—"

With a half-insane cry, Rachel tore open the drawer, snatched out a revolver and covered the mocking demon, who abruptly ducked, crying:

"Shoot, and Baby knives the boy!"

Rachel saw the giant flash a knife over her helpless child, and knew by his savage grin that he would be only too glad of an excuse to drive the deadly weapon home to poor Willie's heart!

CHAPTER VII.

JOHNNY-JUMP-UP DRAWS TO FILL.

THE desperado with the golden locks and the womanish face, cut little time to waste after leaping through the window on parting with Aces-and. With that enforced message in his possession, he knew just what he had to do, and as it contained a spice of danger amid its pure devilry, Johnny-jump-up was all the more ready for business.

"Weaving Mose, I want you and your three mates," he said, as he moved toward his horse. "I'm going to take a little ride, and there may be a bit of rough play before the end comes. Mount and look to your tools, then follow me. The rest of you will stop here under orders of Aces-and."

He leaped lightly into the saddle and rode rapidly away from the spot, casting a passing glance at the corpse of poor Mark Hopkins, which still lay just as the cowboy fell before that unerring shot.

At the base of the corral fence lay the surviving cowboys, bound and helpless, sullen and silent, with the faces of men who more than half anticipate a cruel death ere long. Johnny-jump-up laughed softly as he rode past them, and waved his dainty hand in mockery.

"Tit fer tat, an' it wouldn't be no more'n fair ef the boss was to let us take the kinks out o' our trail-ropes with a two-legged weight at the end o' each!" growled the tall, gangling fellow known among his fellows as Weaving Mose.

Though seemingly addressed purely to his nearest comrade, these words were loud enough to reach the ears of the yellow-haired desperado, who turned partly in his saddle and gazed into the rough, freckled countenance of the grumbler, coolly purring:

"Aces-and would be delighted to hear you express your opinion, Moses, I'm quite sure. But, if you please, I'd like you to wait until after you have performed the share of work I'm laying out for you."

Weaving Mose grinned dubiously, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I didn't whisper it out loud ontel I was dead sure the len'th o' my tongue couldn't nigh reach the boss, Johnny! Though I do look so much like it, I ain't a plum fool, clean all over. I know he runs the deck, an' that we common keards hain't got no say-so in the game 'cept what he gives us of his own a'cord. Nur I ain't kickin' at that, nuther. I on'y say as I think, that it's a durned sin an' a shame that we can't yank them cowboys up like they've bin h'istin' our gang to glory."

"Be durned ef it jes' ain't, now!" muttered another of the party, emboldened by the license given Weaving Mose.

"It's a green player that throws out his whole strength on the first hand, my good fellows," smiled Johnny-jump-up, who appeared to be in an unusually communicative mood, even for him. "Wait until we hit the hand we've been laying low for, and then you'll see the feathers fly in good earnest. It won't be long—unless something crooked turns up in the road, this very sunset will show us at the top-notch, ready to make Dan Brown and his fellow-bloodhounds swear white is black, blue, green or yellow, just as the fancy strikes us!"

"It's mighty consolin' to f'ar even that much aforehand!" uttered Weaving Mose.

Johnny-jump-up was in high good humor over the complete success of their scheming thus far, and seemed willing to please his followers still further. He laughed lightly at the plain hint thus conveyed, and spoke easily:

"You want to know just how much danger there is ahead of your precious carcass, do you? Well, that's easy counted up."

"I am bound for Sol Scott's ranch. I am going to bring the madam and her kid back with me, to sort 'em out 'longside our first draw."

"Won't it look sorter dub'us, when she sees five critters, all of 'em strangers, when the madam back yender mought jes' as easy sent some o' her own men?" shrewdly asked Weaving Mose, fancying he detected a flaw in the plans of his leader.

Johnny-jump-up laughed softly, nodding his head approvingly.

"Don't try to teach your grandmother how to suck eggs, Mose! I've provided for all that. I'll drop you fellows under cover, just ahead," and a wave of one hand indicated the point, where a sort of "draw" or narrow *coulée* crossed the trail, liberally sprinkled with scrubby trees and undergrowth. "I'll ride on alone and do the talking."

A few moments more of brisk riding brought them to the cover, and Johnny-jump-up pointed out to them the ambush they were to occupy. In silence they listened to his repetition of his plans, and then he rode on at a gallop toward the not very far away ranch owned by Sol Scott.

It soon after came into view; the counterpart at first glance of the Single Pot Ranch.

As he rode briskly on, Johnny-jump-up assured himself that his weapons were all in good order, for he knew that he was taking his life in his hands. It might easily happen that some one or more of the cowboys employed on the place had met him before, and if so—if his real character should be so much as suspected—almost certain death would be the reward of his audacity.

"It's all in a lifetime," he muttered, with a low, reckless laugh. "If it is to be, it will be. But I'll not believe it just yet. The game has run too smoothly so far to have a bad break now. We've got to win!"

Even as he uttered the words a dark frown corrugated his brows, for he saw the figure of a man spring suddenly into view from near the foot of a tree which stood a little distance in front of the ranch, and even at that distance could tell that he was scanning him through the medium of a field-glass. A few moments thus, then he caught the faint echo of a shout, and almost immediately a small body of horsemen came sweeping around the corrals and buildings to one side of the ranch proper.

"Four men—five, with the spy!" muttered Johnny-jump-up, showing his white teeth savagely, but not checking the pace of his good horse in the slightest. "They keep a better watch than at the Single Pot Ranch, but I'm betting that the result will be the same. If any one of you fellows happens to know Johnny-jump-up, better begin with your prayers in a hurry, or it'll be forever too late!"

He saw the man with the field-glass leap into the saddle of a led horse and then spur toward him, closely followed by the four cowboys who had responded so promptly to his signal. But Johnny-jump-up only waved his hat on high as he dashed on toward them.

Whatever his faults, lack of courage was not one of them.

"Evening, gentlemen!" he cried, when still at some little distance. "This is Sol Scott's ranch, of course?"

"It is," promptly replied the leader of the little band of guards, as he keenly scrutinized the new-comer. "You are bound there?"

"Straight as a string," laughed Johnny-jump-up, boldly meeting their close and searching scrutiny. "I wish to see Mrs. Scott."

As he uttered these words Johnny-jump-up reined in his horse. It was either that or else to veer abruptly from the trail, for the five cowboys had halted so as to completely bar the way.

"You bring a message from Mr. Scott?"

"Well, not precisely from him, but—"

"He did not send you here, then?" interposed the other, his voice growing a trifle sharper—"you have no token from him?"

Johnny-jump-up opened his blue eyes widely, as he shook his head.

"Then you can't see the mistress," was the positive rejoinder.

"But I've got business with her, my dear fellow! I've come expressly to see her, and to—"

"Sorry, but orders are orders, and we're here to see that those orders are faithfully executed," coldly uttered the cowboy, shaking his head. "If it is important, you can reveal your business to me, and if I think it is necessary I will pass it on to the mistress."

Johnny-jump-up laughed hardly, his eyes beginning to glow.

"One would think you owned the whole ranch, stranger!"

"I'm in charge, under the mistress. If you don't like our way of doing business, the back trail is open to you, sir."

"This is not an insult to me, personally, I hope?"

"Not a bit of it," was the quiet response, though the bronzed cheek flushed a little at the hard, almost insulting tone in which the query was couched. "Our orders apply to all who come here without a particular token from Mr. Scott. If you were the president, you could not pass us without that token."

"All right, then," and a complete change came over the demeanor of the yellow-haired

desperado. "I fancied you were putting on frills just to show your authority in the face of a single man, and he a stranger. If such are the rules and regulations, I'm the last mortal to kick against them. Though it *does* look a little odd!"

"I presume Mr. Scott has his reasons for giving such orders, but they *are* orders, and we have only to do with them," was the calm reply.

"That's all right, my friend," and Johnny-jump-up took the note from his bosom and handed it to the guard. "Mrs. Brown, of the Single Pot Ranch, gave me this, and begged me to hand it to her friend, Mrs. Sol Scott. I'll come as near doing it as your rules will allow, and if there's any afterclap, I'll turn it over to you."

"You can wait here with the boys, while I deliver the note," said Top Dancer, calmly, turning his horse and speeding off to the ranch, in the front door of which the keen eyes of Johnny-jump-up now caught a brief glimpse of a woman's figure.

"Feels his oats a little, don't he?" laughed the desperado, with a wink to the remaining guards.

"S'posin' you ax him when he comes back?" dryly retorted a tall, grizzled fellow, who apparently was not greatly fascinated by this fancifully rigged out stranger.

Johnny-jump-up shrugged his shoulders and contented himself with lighting a cigarette, lazily puffing at it while keeping a keen though veiled watch on the front of the ranch, where the figure of Top Dancer was still visible, holding his hat in his hand and evidently waiting for further instructions from his fair mistress.

These were not long delayed, for shortly after Johnny-jump-up caught another glimpse of light drapery just within the door, and then Top Dancer turned about, waving his hat above his head.

"That means you're to go yonder, with us, stranger," growled the tall cowboy, wrenching his horse around.

"Anything to please the company," laughed Johnny-jump-up, with a brilliant sparkle in his eyes that told how well satisfied he was to obey this command.

For a few minutes he had feared his plans were going crooked to his hopes; but now he felt just the contrary. The veiled hint contained in the note had evidently produced the effect hoped for, and Mrs. Scott's curiosity to learn more would not permit her to wait.

Johnny-jump-up leaped from the saddle and doffed his hat with a courtly bow as he neared the threshold where the lady awaited him, and a light of admiration filled his blue eyes as he took in her appearance at a glance.

If lovely before her marriage with Sol Scott, May Beverley [See BEADLE'S DIME LIBRARY No. 141] was even more beautiful now that she was a wife and mother. Her slender figure had filled out and developed into a most charming symmetry, and the love of husband and child had long since driven the grave, sorrowful expression from her face and the haunted look from her eyes.

She bowed politely in response, a winning smile curving her red lips, her voice sounding bright and cordial, though Johnny-jump-up fancied he could detect just a trace of anxiety in her tones:

"You are just from Fairview, Mr.—"

"Murgatroyd," with a low bow. "Direct from there, Mrs. Scott."

"And you left all well? But please step inside. I have so many questions to ask you," she added, with a little laugh that betrayed her actual nervousness.

Johnny-jump-up complied.

The cunning gamester soon found himself seated in a cosy little room, with Mrs. Scott before him, her eyes far more impatient than her tongue.

"Mrs. Brown was well, of course? And the children?"

"Mrs. Brown was quite well, though I fancied she looked a little pale, if not troubled in mind. It may have been a mere fancy, though, for years have passed since I last met her; shortly after her marriage, in fact."

"Then you are quite an old friend of hers?"

"Of her husband's, rather," bowed Johnny-jump-up. "We were in the same line of business then, and when I chanced to stumble across Dan Brown, of Denver, as we used to call him, he jumped at the chance of sending a letter to his wife."

"You are just from him then?" and a wistful look came into the woman's eyes. "You—did you happen to meet my husband?"

The winning smile suddenly fled from the face of the cunning gamester, though he quickly lifted a hand to hide the change, and he laughed inwardly as he saw how pale the poor, deceived lady grew. Just as he intended, she was fearing the worst.

"No, I did not meet him. In fact, there was little chance of that, for I only stopped there a few minutes, and then—that is—"

"What do you mean, sir?" cried Mrs. Scott, her whole frame quivering, her face pale as that

of a corpse. "You know something—you are keeping bad news from me—my poor husband!"

This was a little further than Johnny-jump-up intended to go, and he earnestly, hastily cried:

"You wrong me, madam! Indeed you do! I know nothing of bad news that can concern you. It is true, just before I came across my old friend, there had been a fight with the gang of Aces-and, but I pledge you my word of honor that Dan Brown never mentioned the name of your husband to me. If he did in the letter he wrote his wife, I am also ignorant of the fact."

"That, more than anything else, convinces me my fears are well founded," uttered Mrs. Scott, in a calmer tone, though still ghastly pale, her hands and lips quivering with strong emotion. "If not—if all had been well—he would not have let you come here without at least a word to reassure my poor heart!"

"But Mrs. Brown—"

"She writes so strangely! She hints at news, but does not say that my husband is well—does not mention him—only begs me to come over with my child to stop over a night or two with her."

"Because she felt lonesome," ventured Johnny-jump-up; but the poor woman shook her head with a wan smile.

"Mr. Brown has written her something which she dared not commit to paper. It can be but the one thing—bad news of my poor husband. If good news, she would have spoken out plainly."

"You will go to her?"

"At once!" and she started to leave the room, turning again with a trembling smile as she faltered: "Please pardon my rudeness. I am so dreadfully agitated, I scarcely know what I am saying or doing."

"I beg of you not to mention it, my dear madam," bowed Johnny-jump-up, with a bright smile. "I never once suspected it, I assure you. And while you are getting ready for the ride, I will just step outside and look to my horse, if you will permit me."

"And please tell Top Dancer to saddle my horse."

Johnny-jump-up bowed and left the room after her. She ran up-stairs to where her little girl was sleeping, while he passed outdoors.

Top Dancer received the message in silence, and in a few minutes brought around a beautifully spotted pony, equipped for a lady's use.

Mrs. Scott did not keep them long in waiting, but bearing her child—a lovely little girl of two years of age—in her arms, emerged from the ranch and announced her readiness for the road.

"Look after the place, Dancer, please, and see that—"

"Begging pardon, madam, but I'm going with you," respectfully interposed the man, his hat in hand, his face grave and earnest.

"But this gentleman is going back with me."

"I'll not crowd him, madam," and Top Dancer smiled slightly. "I only know that Mr. Scott bade me watch over you while he was away. He said I was to attend you wherever you cared to go. He is my master, and you would not wish me to incur his anger for breaking orders?"

"Of course not, but—"

"I must go, ma'am," persisted Dancer, still respectfully.

"Without her permission?" and Johnny-jump-up arched his brows.

"Or yours either," nodded Dancer, with a flash in his eyes.

"Mine?" laughed Johnny-jump-up, lightly. "I'll be delighted to have your company, I am sure. I've really fallen in love with you!"

A glance from the eyes of his mistress checked the hot retort that leaped to the lips of the faithful guard, and without a word he assisted her into the saddle. He vaulted into his own saddle, and at a word from him three of the other guards also mounted and closed in about their fair mistress.

Johnny-jump-up made no further remark, but there came a deadly glow and glitter into his blue eyes that, had he not veiled it with his long lashes, might well have betrayed his evil purpose. As it was, the lady and her faithful guards rode rapidly on in a direct line for the point where the outlaws lay in ambush, thirsting for blood.

The good horses covered the ground at a rapid rate, and Johnny-jump-up, in a glorious humor, kept the party from thinking too deeply. His nimble tongue rattled on, recalling imaginary events of the past in which he, with Dan Brown and others whose names were household words in that region, had figured.

His spirited horse had carried him just a little in advance of the others; he was sitting partially sideways, holding his hat in one hand, gesticulating with the other, his handsome countenance lighted up with ardor, when his hat fluttered to the ground directly before the pony ridden by Mrs. Scott. It flinched and leaped to one side.

And then, with a revolver in each hand, the demon fired four shots in such swift succession that they made but one prolonged report.

Death-stricken, unable even to touch a wea-

pon, the guards reeled and fell to the earth, while Johnny-jump-up laughed aloud in devilish glee as his men broke from their ambush and spurred to cut off the flight of the terribly startled woman and her child.

"Hi-yah!" yelled the desperado, casting his hat high into the air and sending a brace of bullets through it ere it fell. "I drew to fill, and caught 'em the first clatter! A royal flush, as I'm a cherubim!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"A KID FULL ON QUEENS!"

ONCE again was Rachel Brown conquered by her maternal love. The sight of the deadly peril which menaced her boy paralyzed her arm for a single breath, but that was long enough to insure the safety of Aces-and. A swift, sure grasp, and the revolver was torn from her hand without being discharged. And at the same instant the outlaw chief called out sharply:

"Hold your hand, Baby! I've got the tiger-cat, so spare the cub!"

Johnny's Infant obeyed, though the ferocious smile faded abruptly from his ugly countenance.

Aces-and tossed the weapon out at the window, then forced Rachel Brown back into her seat, pinning both of her wrists together with one of his sinewy hands. A slender forefinger quivered before her pale face, and the voice of the gamester was harsh and menacing:

"It seems to me you haven't been paying much attention to the way the cards are running, my dear woman, or you'd see the worse than folly of making so many bad breaks. For this once I'll let it pass, but another clatter of the same stripe will make you sup sorrow, and that with a mighty short spoon. You understand?"

Rachel nodded, but Aces-and could see that this was a purely mechanical motion. Her eyes were fixed hungrily on her boy, whom Johnny's Infant still held in a painfully tight grip, and in such a manner that the long, ugly knife hung close before his eyes.

"Never mind the kid," impatiently uttered the outlaw chief. "He's all right so long as you keep inside the track, but if you make another such break—well, I'd be lying if I said he'd come out of it as clean-skinned as just now."

"My poor boy!" murmured the half-crazed mother.

"If you'd show a little more common sense, and not do so much whining about your poor boy," sneered Aces-and, "it would do your motherly love a heap more credit."

"You drove me mad with your vile, heartless taunts!"

"Well, the sooner you get your senses back, the better for all concerned," was the brutal retort. "You want to understand your position while in our company, and I don't know of a better time than the present to teach you."

"As I had the honor of informing you a bit ago, we are playing a big game of freeze-out against Dan Brown, Sol Scott and their bloodhounds. They've made their brags that they wouldn't let up until the last one of our kidney was swept from existence. They've been particularly loud and bitter in their denunciations of myself and brother, even going so far as to say that after running us down and capturing us, they would strip, mount us on donkeys, placard us, and in that style parade us through the whole country, before hanging us like sheep-killing curs!"

"If so, would it be worse punishment than your countless crimes have so richly merited?" cried Rachel, with a reviving flash of spirit.

"That's from your side of the board," was the cool retort, as the outlaw regained control of his hot passions. From ours—look:

"We could hear the yelp of the bloodhounds on our trail. We felt them closing in on us, cutting off our hopes of escape by all save one avenue. And that—it was doubly dangerous, but at the end of it we could see a rich reward for all risks we might run. It only wanted nerve, audacity, heartlessness, if you choose."

"While Dan Brown and Sol Scott were pressing us, as they fondly fancied, into a corner from whence escape with life would be impossible, we were doubling on them, were swooping down on their pet dove-cotes, our beaks whetted and hungry for fresh and dainty food. For a little while we half-resolved to have it, too, knowing that in that way we could sting our bitterest enemies the acutest. But then, the meal once ate, and all would be over. And so we thought of a more scientific game."

"Freeze-out, as I said before, with us poor devils of horse-thieves pitted against the marvelous players whom the community have dubbed the 'ROYAL FLUSH!' Long odds, but what better can we do? And do you know, my dear girl, I begin to believe that we'll get there, too?"

Aces-and laughed softly, rubbing his hands together in high glee as he fell back a pace or two, leaving Rachel Brown to comfort the little girl once more.

The poor woman shuddered as she glanced into his dark, bandaged face.

"You brought Dan Brown an enormous fortune when he married you, I have heard. Sol

Scott was equally fortunate with his darling. Some do say that both have met with heavy losses, but I am confident enough remains to make a pot gloriously worth playing for, to give each and every one of us enough ducats to retire from active service, to enjoy ourselves in prime style, at least long enough for our past history to grow dim in the memory of the dear public, and enable them to get together fresh goods for our taking."

"You don't want to fool yourself, my dear girl. We've counted up all the chances for and against us in this little game. We know the penalty of defeat, and if fate will have it so, we will pay it without kick or murmur. Not until the last card is shown and summed up, though! Nothing but grim death can freeze any of us out!"

"What part am I and these poor helpless children to play in your wretched game?" faltered Rachel, as Aces-and paused as though expecting some remark or comment from her.

"You three are part of the hand we expect to win the stakes on," was the swift reply. "I have sent Johnny-jump-up off to bring back Sol Scott's wife and young-one. With them, joined to you three, we'll have a good enough hand—a kid full on queens!" he laughed, pleased at the odd idea. "In a regular game, a royal flush would beat that all hollow, but I don't reckon it will this time. Not when Dan Brown and Sol Scott realize that there's a knife-point at each dainty throat, the muzzle of a revolver pressing over each loving heart!"

"They will pay you your own price, though it strips them of every dollar and every dollar's worth they own in this world!" impulsively cried Rachel, her dark eyes glowing.

"Just what I calculated on, my dear," laughed Aces-and, in more good-humored tones than any he had used before. "They'll come down handsome, no doubt of that. They're human, as far as love for their own flesh and blood is concerned. Be sure I settled that point before I dealt out a single card."

"Then why use such harsh measures? Why treat these poor children so brutally?" impulsively cried the mother.

"Partly to let you know that we're not playing this little game for fun, but mainly to crush that fiery spirit of yours, my lady. You might give us trouble at an awkward moment, else. You'll hardly make the effort if you know beyond a doubt that your children will be the ones to suffer most from your rashness. I warn you once more: if you cut up rusty—if you try to shoot or cut or run again—if you take a single step out of the trail I show you—that precious cub of yours shall bear the burden, and what he has tasted thus far will be no more than a flea-bite to what that punishment will be!"

"As for this note you have written, I'll keep my word. I will add nothing to it. You shall see me pin it up to the trunk of the tree out yonder, where the eyes of your husband can hardly escape seeing it at the first glance. When he does, he will know just what sort of game there is before him."

Rachel's lips parted, but closed again. She dared not ask a favor of the villain, lest worse come of it. But he was apparently satisfied with the severe lesson already read her, and at a sign from him, Johnny's Infant released Willie, who ran hastily into her eager arms.

Aces-and smiled grimly as he noted this, then said:

"You keep an eye on them, Baby, and see that they don't leave this room before I come or send for them. If she tries to pocket a knife, gun or any other tool, take them away from her, and report through the window. I'll come back, and you can lecture the cub again for his mother's fault."

"I have given you my word, sir," coldly uttered Mrs. Brown.

"I'm not taking any such pledges at this stage of the game, thank you," was the sharp reply, and then the outlaw turned and left the room.

A single comprehensive glance showed him that all was going well outside. The cowboys were lying quiet where placed. His men were on the alert, a number of them mounted and riding slowly around the ranch, keeping a close lookout for possible visitors. The remainder were between the building and the corral where the cowboys lay helpless.

A single whistle from the lips of Aces-and brought them around him, and cutting little time to waste, he spoke out:

"Our main object here is accomplished, my lads, and in less than half an hour we must be in the saddle and riding away. During that length of time, after picking out an extra mount for each man from Dan Brown's choicest stock, you can gut the building if you feel like it. Only bear in mind that we may have to ride hard and long, and so pick your plunder. It is only pickings, after all, when we look at the rich stakes we are playing for in this big game."

"But every little helps!" laughed big Dave Bristow.

"Look to the cattle first," added Aces-and. "By that time, I'll have the woman and kid's ready for traveling, and you can have free run of the house until I sound boots-and-saddle."

Amid wild cheers from his pleased ruffians, Aces-and turned on his heel and re-entered the house.

He found Johnny's Infant keeping guard over the prisoners, a look of sullen disgust on his massive features.

"Hain't done a durned crooked thing, boss!" he growled, sourly.

Aces-and laughed, but more in grim pleasure at the smooth working of his lecture. Rachel had taken it close to her heart, and spent the time in soothing the injured feelings of her gallant boy. So well had she succeeded that Willie did not even flinch as Aces-and patted him patronizingly on the head, though he had to cast down his eyes to hide the look of more than boyish anger and hatred that filled them. It was for his mother's sake, and he would control himself.

"We are about to take saddle, my dear madam," Aces-and said, in a not unpleasant tone of voice. "I will look after the kids while you get what wraps and things you think they will need. Make haste!"

Rachel distrust not remonstrance. She bowed her head and kissed each of the children, in a whisper bidding Willie care for Cherry, then hastened up-stairs. She was not gone long, fearing for her loved ones, and in a wonderfully short space of time Aces-and led them forth from the home which they were fated never again to enter.

With Rachel he passed over to the stable devoted to the home saddle-horses, and had the one she indicated as her own, equipped for her use. She pointed out the pony belonging to Willie, but he shook his head in the negative.

"It could hardly keep pace with us, and one of the men will carry him on the saddle-bow. After all, you may not find it such a mighty long ride, when the truth is told.

Mrs. Brown ventured no remonstrance, for she felt that this decision was one brought about by the suspicions which still lurked in the crafty brain of the outlaw chief, and feared any objection on her part would but serve to confirm these.

Ten minutes later, Aces-and gave the warning whistle that was to call his men from their hasty plundering. While they were mounting, he guided Rachel to the wide spreading tree which grew in front of the ranch, and showed her the note she had written. It was pinned to the tree-trunk with a knife taken from one of the bound cowboys.

"I'd like to see the worthy Daniel when he first discovers that parting message!" the villain laughed, his eyes glowing evilly.

"I wish you could!" impulsively exclaimed Rachel.

Aces-and stared at her for a moment, then broke into a hearty laugh as he divined her meaning. He was not offended. As a winner so far in his desperate game, he could afford to be thick-skinned.

Promptly his signal was obeyed, and the outlaws poured out of the gutted ranch, each one bearing some sort of plunder. Rachel turned paler than ever as she noted this. Willie grew indignant, and only a warning, appealing look from his mother kept him from breaking out in boyish rage at this rude desecration of the household gods.

Aces-and cut the danger short by leading the way in the direction of the Sol Scott ranch, Rachel, bearing Cherry in her lap, riding beside him. Near at hand came big Darius Throop, holding Willie on the saddle-bow before him. Little fear that Rachel Brown would give them any serious trouble, as long as the hands of Johnny's Infant held her precious boy!

Aces-and kept a keen, anxious watch in advance, for there was yet a portion of his bold stroke incomplete, but then a wild, impulsive yell burst from his lips as he caught sight of a little body of mounted men and saw a well-known figure spurring ahead of the rest.

"Johnny, by the eternal!" he cried, swinging aloft his hat in high glee as he dashed forward.

It was Johnny-jump-up, riding swiftly toward them, swinging his hat in the air and making the welkin ring again with his wild yells.

No need to ask how he had fared. There was complete success in his every movement, and even before his keen eyes could distinguish the figure of a woman with a child in her arms, riding in the midst of the main party, Aces-and knew all had gone exactly as they had planned.

"Good boy Johnny!" he cried, laughing grimly as the two horses met and halted breast to breast. "Shake!"

"Shake it is," laughed the womanish-looking desperado, suiting the action to the word. "But why all this gush? One would say you looked for a misplay on my part!"

"Not through any fault of yours, though, Johnny," was the cordial reply. "But it's a mighty big game we've set out to play, and that naturally makes me a little more anxious than usual."

"Nerves, old man," laughed the other. "I always said you had 'em, and that right there lay your weak point as a gambler. Thank the foul fiend I've nothing of the sort!"

"You had no trouble, then? You didn't leave

any ugly suspicions behind you, Johnny?" asked his brother, ignoring the slur at his nerve.

"No suspicions alive," was the significant reply.

"Then you did—"

"Saved Sol Scott the necessity of paying the wages due four of his best men—only that," with a light, musical laugh.

"How—what led up to it? Curse it, man!" with a dark frown and impatient motion of his right hand. "This is no time for folly. The stakes are too large for that. What happened—in one word!"

Reckless though he was, Johnny-jump-up knew better than to play with his brother when in a mood like this, and in as few words as possible he put him in full possession of the story.

"The madam tried to run for it, but the boys blocked that little game. They roped her horse, and when I made sure the four greens were past telling how the lightning struck them, we came on to meet you."

Aces-and frowned a little as he listened to the bloody recital, and his strong white teeth bit his nether lip until they were tinged with blood.

But only for a breath did this last.

With a short, hard laugh he again clasped the hand of his brother, saying:

"I wish I could have seen the sport, Johnny, but I'll take your word for it. You've done enough for once, and—"

"How so?" was the swift interruption.

"You've altered your plan?"

"About leaving word at the Single Pot Ranch?"

"Or where the Single Pot Ranch now stands—yes."

"No," was the slow response. "It won't do for us to lose any time that can be saved. The place must be burned, for we've sworn to strip Dan Brown of every feather; but *you* needn't do it."

"You think I can't be trusted, perhaps?" and Johnny-jump-up laughed very softly, but very viciously.

"Don't be an ass, lad," impatiently retorted Aces-and. "You know better than that. No man in the gang can do the work better, nor half so well, as you can, but—"

"Then why are you throwing me over?"

"For your own sake, lad," and the elder brother rested one hand tenderly, lovingly on the other's shoulder. "You shot the cowboy back yonder, and be sure none of those we left trussed up will forget that. You could hardly butcher them all, and when they got loose, salt wouldn't save you!"

"You forget the sort of safeguard I'll have," and Johnny-jump-up glanced toward the women and their children, now united for a time.

"It's too great a risk," persisted Aces-and, real anxiety in his face and voice. "I can spare any ten of the gang, far better than I can you, Johnny."

"Thanks for the compliment, old fellow," and their hands met. "But all the same, I'm going to stick to the line of play which we figured out while shuffling the cards. Dan Brown won't dare see me come to harra when he knows that the lives of his wife and kids depends on mine. I know the whole game, while none of the men more than suspect a part. It would take a good hour to explain it to the one chosen to succeed me, and even then you couldn't swear but what his nerve would fail him, just when the most depended upon it."

"That's true, and if I thought—"

"Don't think anything more about it, for it's settled," decisively interposed Johnny-jump-up, making a move to pass on.

"Since you will have it, all right, but," and the outlaw chief drew a long, deep breath, "if harm comes to you, they'd better have died ages before falling into my hands!"

Johnny-jump-up laughed softly, and once more their hands met in a firm, lingering pressure, then he doffed his hat with a mocking bow to the captives as he dashed past them, riding back to the Single Pot Ranch—and to his fate!

During this conversation between the brothers, the two women had met and interchanged tearful, agitated greetings. They could not say much, with all those rough, grinning ruffians looking on, but May Scott received sweet comfort in the assurance that no bad news had come from her absent husband. And this thought, with the addition of being together, gave them both much comfort. They knew that their husbands would know no rest until they were freed from their horrible captivity.

Aces-and did not waste many words with his new captive. In blunt speech he told her that the good of her child would depend on how little trouble its mother gave him. This, and then he led the way once more over the plain, veering sharply to the right, in order to avoid passing near the Scott Ranch.

They rode on at a steady pace without pause or break for two hours or more, when Aces-and, who had been casting frequent glances over his shoulder, uttered a low laugh and exclaimed:

"There goes the signal for Dan Brown to hasten home, ladies!"

A dull red light was steadily growing higher up the dark sky as the captives glanced around. The Single Pot Ranch was ablaze!

CHAPTER IX.

BEGINNING A NEW DEAL.

THAT night was one never to be forgotten by either Dan Brown or Sol Scott.

All doubts were gone. They believed that Dough-ball Jimmy had at length spoken the simple truth; that their loved ones were in imminent peril; that deadly danger threatened them from one beside whom a famished tiger might be considered merciful.

They rode as they had never ridden before, pressing on their good steeds with voice, hand and spur. They changed from one saddle to the other, almost without checking the mad speed of the animals in the least.

On, without a word, though their good steeds carried them side by side as in generous rivalry. Their brains were too busy, their hearts too full for speech. And the only changes in that headlong race against time was the rapid shifting from saddle to saddle when the ridden animals began to show signs of their flagging beneath the burden.

Then—a low, grating sound hissed through the tightly clinched teeth of Dan Brown, and a redder light leaped into the eyes of the brother detectives as though reflecting that which was slowly, silently spreading across the horizon before them. Dim, barely distinguishable at first, but then broadening, growing in upward extent, turning redder and brighter until—only one thing could represent it.

The work of human hands was going up in flames!

A little closer the horse ridden by Sol Scott edged to that bestridden by Dan Brown. Two strong hands met in a grip that threatened to crush bones and sinew. Not a word was spoken but that grip told all.

They knew that one of their homes was being destroyed by fire. At such a distance, neither could tell which ranch it was for certain. They knew, too, that Dough-ball Jimmy had delayed his warning too long. They knew that Aces-and and his merciless gang of thieves and cut-throats had already dealt the first heavy blow in his boasted game of freeze-out!

On with bloody spur. On with panting steeds, whose heaving flanks steamed and smoked in the cool, pure air of the fall night. On without check or pause for aught. Still on, though only too well did they know that the work of the flames would be complete long before they could cover the long miles that lay between them and the red beacon.

The red light spread and grew brighter. It began to fade. It sunk lower and became less vivid. It faded into a dim, yellowish fog, then was swallowed up by the night.

Midnight came and passed, but still those two grim riders sped on, keeping their heavily laboring animals going at a rare pace, changing saddles with increasing frequency. Then, to rest the jaded creatures at least in part, the two detectives leaped to the ground and raced on foot, one hand wound in the tangled mane, more to retain control of their steeds than for the aid it lent them in covering the ground.

And thus, riding and running, shifting their weight from one horse to another, the avengers pressed on, thinking only of reaching home in the shortest possible time.

The small hours crept on, and now the two men had but three animals between them. One dropped dead beneath Dan Brown of Denver, but the detective came down on his feet and seemed to rebound into the second saddle. On they swept, without a second glance at the poor steed who had given its life to hasten its master to the rescue.

A night never to be forgotten. A night that seemed a nightmare, black, terrible, hopeless! A night that aged those desperate riders more than years of ordinary experience.

Here another horse drops beneath that killing strain. A few miles further on, and a third victim lies motionless, with blood staining the dry, hard ground about its nostrils—blood from a broken heart.

The gray of dawn shows the two detectives on foot, pressing forward with dogged resolution. Side by side they run, pale, worn, haggard of face and hollow-eyed, but stern and dogged as when they first beheld the red light of that fiery beacon.

Not a word is interchanged.

A rosy glow is spreading in the east, and at the same moment the two racers catch sight of horsemen in their front. A single interchange of glances, then their right hands clutch their trusty pistols and they press on with renewed speed. If enemies, let those before them beware! If friends, they must at least yield one horse apiece.

A loud, ringing cheer as the foremost rider recognizes the twain. A rush of horses, and a Babel of voices as the cowboys surround their employers.

"My wife—my children?"

"And mine?"

Silence. The rough cowboys glanced at each other, loth to reply. No need, now. Their looks have spoken clearly enough, and Dan Brown leaps into the nearest saddle, dashing away with rowels buried to the shanks in the flank of the snort-

ing mustang. And close at his heels rides Sol Scott.

Ten minutes later, and they can see the ruins of Single Pot Ranch. A heap of ashes, with a few tiny curls of smoke still ascending from them. Beyond, the fences of the corrals, one end charred and smoking. The wide-spreading tree, its leaves shriveled and crisp from the great heat sent out by the burning building; on its trunk a gleam of white paper. At its base a recumbent figure, with a bloody blanket for a shroud.

Straight for the tree raced Dan Brown, leaping from the saddle as his steed dashed past. He tore the knife from the tree-trunk, and with a single glance, as it seemed, drank in the contents of that paper.

"Thank God! It might have been worse!"

These words broke from his parched lips as he handed the paper to Sol Scott. One glance was all he gave the written lines, then dropped the paper, saying huskily:

"Pray that my loved ones have fared no worse! I'm off!"

It was the turn of Dan Brown to act the part of prudence now, and his strong grasp checked the detective, his voice rapidly uttering:

"I saw some of your men—one, at least—with the party we met. Wait for him; they are coming back. He will know all."

Sol Scott yielded, just as Dan Brown had yielded to him the evening before. The delay was short. Already the cowboys were racing up, and then a few brief questions from Dan Brown told Sol Scott the worst.

His wife and child had set out for Single Pot Ranch, under guard, and with a man who claimed to have a note from Mrs. Brown.

When the red glow in the heavens attracted attention, the three men remaining on his ranch at once sped in that direction, to lend what aid they might to the sufferer.

They had eyes only for the fire, and but for the sudden shying of their horses as they neared the *coulee*, they would have ridden over and past their murdered mates without discovery.

"All dead?" grated Sol Scott, his eyes glowing vividly.

"All but Top Dancer, an' he so nigh to it he couldn't more'n make signs how it come about," was the grave response.

"Where is he?"

"Thar by the *coulee*," was the response. "We couldn't fetch him 'long with us, he was that weak an' so nigh gone. We didn't like to leave him thar to die alone, so Ben Jimson stopped 'long with him, while we rid on to do what we could, Tom 'nd me."

"Ben hasn't come up?"

The cowboy shook his head in the negative.

"Then Dancer must be alive. Dan, you take charge here, while I go to learn the truth from Top Dancer."

Without another word Sol Scott plunged spurs into his new mount, and dashed away at break-neck speed.

The cowboys stared covertly at Dan Brown, astonished at his icy composure, where they naturally expected wild excitement if not furious ravings. They little realized what a hell of passion was seething and boiling beneath that calm exterior.

Dan Brown singled out one of his men, the oldest and most experienced of the lot, and drew him a little apart from the rest, though still remaining within earshot. He questioned him sharply, until he had gleaned a tolerably accurate account of all that had transpired.

He told of the coming to the ranch of the three strangers, and the cool, confident manner in which they had deceived Mark Hopkins. He told how the reports of revolvers inside the house gave them the first hint of trouble, and then, a little shame-faced, he told how their attempted rescue was foiled through their love for the mistress and her children.

In stern silence Dan Brown listened, his face showing neither reproach nor approval until the cowboy broke down, his voice unsteady, his averted eyes filling with tears of indignation and grief.

"You were not to blame, West," the detective said, one hand resting on the shoulder of the cowboy, turning him around until their eyes met. "I know those hellhounds well. They would have murdered my wife and children if you had made a rush then. You acted for the best."

"But I feel like a durned, no 'count, aig-suck-in' cur over it!" the cowboy ejaculated, his fists clinching savagely. "Big, stout men like us, to stan' by an' see them imps o' Satan kerry off—oh, blazes!"

If so hard for him, what must it have been for the husband and father? Yet Brown showed no outward signs of grief or rage. He was cold and composed.

Before pressing his investigations further, Dan Brown raked together a few living brands, and on their glowing coals he dropped pinch after pinch of the curious powder, sending up black balloons similar to those produced by Sol Scott shortly before that terrible night race was begun. And standing near the little fire, occasionally dropping on the powder, he bade his man continue his recital.

A good deal more at ease, now that he knew his employer did not hold them accountable for his measureless loss, West Long proceeded to tell of the departure of the marauders and what followed.

It was well along in the evening when the bound and helpless cowboys were startled by the breaking out of the flames. The first light showed from the rear of the ranch, and the building was well on fire before they so much as suspected anything of the sort. They neither saw nor heard anybody about the place, after the departure of the gang under lead of Aces-and, but such there must have been, since it was not likely the fire could have smoldered so long before breaking out.

More desperately than ever did they strive to burst their bonds, but with no better success than before. They had been bound by men who evidently understood their business.

"It looked like we was boun' to sizzle afore long," grimly added West Long, passing his scorched hands over his charred garments. "We was piled up by the fence nighest the house, an' what little wind there was blowed right in our teeth, fetchin' the smoke an' the heat straight fer our hides. The fence wouldn't 'low us to roll away. We jes' shet our teeth to grin an' b'ar it, when we hearn a yell, an' up rid Tom an' Jack Purcell, come to see what was up an' to lend a han' ef they was time to save anythin'."

Thus the apparently doomed cowboys were set free, and none too soon, as their scorched extremities and charred clothing bore ample evidence. The ranch was beyond their saving. The corral fences caught fire, but there they could do more, and soon cut off the fire.

They hunted around for sign, and discovered the note pinned to the trunk of the tree. They consulted over what course to pursue, and finally decided to send out men in search of the detectives, though they knew nothing more of them than that they were operating somewhere up toward the upper line.

The result has been seen.

While listening and sending up the signal smokes, Dan Brown had been glancing over the men around, and now, as West Long ceased speaking, he slowly uttered:

"And how many men have taken the trail of the kidnappers?"

There was no immediate response. The cowboys interchanged quick, furtive glances, then they lowered their eyes. West Long shifted nervously from one foot to the other, but said nothing.

"I see here the faces of all my men, save that of Mark Hopkins. His body lies yonder, and his death proves that he at least tried to do his duty. Not one of you have taken a step to rescue your mistress, yet I hired you for men. Instead, you prove yourselves cowards!"

West Long was gazing toward the tree under which rested the body of Mark Hopkins. A sudden light flashed into his eyes, and striding forward he picked up a slip of paper from the ground. It was the same which Aces-and had pinned to the tree directly beneath the note written by Mrs. Brown, but which had somehow become detached and fallen to the ground, thus escaping the notice of the one for whom it was intended, Dan Brown, of Denver.

West Long quietly handed the paper to the detective, whose keen eyes drank in the brief contents:

"TO DAN BROWN AND HIS BLOODHOUNDS:—

"If any attempt is made at pursuit or rescue before my messenger brings you our terms for ransom, I swear that the five captives now in our power shall be killed without mercy. You know me, at least by reputation. ACES-AND."

"That's our excuse, boss," quietly said Long.

"It is sufficient, and I take back my words. Instead I thank you for your thoughtfulness," gravely uttered Dan Brown, passing rapidly around the little circle, and warmly grasping each hand.

Meanwhile, Sol Scott had ridden direct for the *coulee* where Johnny-jump-up had placed his men in ambush in order to make sure the capture of Mrs. Scott and her little girl.

As he drew near the spot he saw a man start up with ready rifle, but the recognition was instant, and in another minute Sol Scott was kneeling beside poor Top Dancer.

"I did the best I knew how, boss," feebly muttered the wounded cowboy, a wistful light in his sunken eyes. "I'm glad I've lived long enough to tell you that we did our level best."

"Of that I am certain, Dancer, old friend," gently responded the detective, as he answered the feeble grip with an earnest pressure. "If my trust in you had not been perfect, would I have left such precious treasures in your charge?"

"To lose 'em at last!" groaned the wounded man.

"Not through fault of yours, I am confident."

"Nor that of the boys, boss," was the quick ejaculation. "They died for her, though they couldn't save her nor the darling from that laughing devil! Died—and he didn't give us a chance to fire even a shot in their defense—hell's blackest curses on his head!"

"Who was it, Dancer? You knew him?"

"Not then, or I'd have riddled him at the jump-off, boss," was the calmer reply. "He played it mighty well. He fooled us all. He made the madam think he brought a note from Mrs. Brown. She trusted him, and so did we, though I kept in mind your orders never to permit her to pass off the place without escorting her."

"Who was it?"

"Johnny-jump-up, boss."

"That merciless devil!"

"Sure, boss. I heard him tell the madam so before they rode off."

"He ambushed you at this point, of course?"

"Yes—at least, I suppose so. I know I remember catching a glimpse of other men; but Johnny-jump-up did all the work. He opened on us without a word. We hadn't time to touch a gun before it was all over."

Sol Scott arose and was about to mount again when Top Dancer said, in trembling but eager tones:

"Let me go too, boss! Don't make me stay here to die! Let me ride back to the ranch with you. It's a dying man asks it!"

"I'm going back to Dan Brown's," was the kind reply. "You would not be able to stand the trip. I will send men to take you home."

"With you—to see you—set off after those—hounds!" the wounded cowboy gasped, brokenly. "If not ride—crawl as far—"

He actually made the attempt, turning over on his hands and knees and dragging himself in the direction of the Single Pot Ranch!

Sol Scott quickly intercepted him, saying:

"If you insist upon it, Dancer, you shall go; but I warn you that it will most certainly prove your death."

"I've got it anyway, boss," with a haggard smile. "The smiling devil sent his lead home, but I'll live to see the outfit take the trail. I'll know the boys'll strike one blow, fire one shot, for their—old pard!"

Scott understood just how the wounded man felt, and though he had serious doubts as to his ability to make the trip, he could no longer deny him. With the aid of Ben Jimson, who had long since bound up the bullet wound, he lifted Top Dancer into the saddle of Jimson's horse, holding him steady while Jimson climbed up behind him, then bestrode his own horse and rode slowly back to the ruins of the Single Pot Ranch.

Top Dancer bore the journey much better than might have been expected, and when the spot was reached, he was carefully lowered to the ground and placed beneath the tree, with his head and shoulders leaning against the trunk, so that he might see all that transpired, without straining himself.

Dan Brown, intrusting the signal-making to West Long, drew Sol Scott aside and showed to him the brief warning signed by Aces-and.

"I have not decided whether it is more than a bluff to gain time or not," he said, in low, troubled tones. "The scoundrel is none too good to carry out his threat, if crowded, though he must know that in so doing he would be sealing his own fate. The world wouldn't be big enough to hide him from us then!"

"It isn't big enough to hide him long, even now," was the quiet response, those big blue eyes glowing like coals of fire.

"Of course, but you know what I mean."

"Yes. And I think we will wait a bit before taking the trail."

"And give him a chance to get into quarters where we can't drive him out?" a little sharply ejaculated Dan Brown of Denver.

"Wait a bit," was the cool response. "Of course we'll take the trail, when we start in force. But while you are waiting for his messenger, what is to hinder me from playing a lone hand? I can do it without his smoking me, were he ten times as cunning."

"If he should discover you, you couldn't set them free without aid, and he might punish them for the venture. If I thought he really meant to send a messenger to treat for ransom, I'd—"

"You should know him better than that. He's after the money, no doubt, but when he gets that, do you for a moment believe he'll throw away his only safeguard? That he'll set the prisoners free and so—"

The sentence was never finished. A hoarse, angry cry from the lips of Top Dancer startled them, and turning, they saw him lean forward, a revolver in his trembling grasp—saw him discharge it at a horseman who had just appeared from behind one of the corrals.

"It's that laughing devil!" gasped the wounded cowboy, falling forward on his face. "It's that devil's whelp, Johnny-jump-up!"

CHAPTER X.

JOHNNY-JUMP-UP MAKES A BLUFF.

FOR a single breath the startled spectators stood like men suddenly paralyzed, and probably not one among their number fairly understood the meaning of the scene until the shot was fired and Top Dancer fell forward on his face in his mad effort to leap to his feet.

Then, as they caught the name of the desperado who had played so prominent a part in the tragedy, a hoarse roar burst from many lips,

and weapons flashed from their scabbards like magic.

Top Dancer was right. This bold rider was none other than Johnny-jump-up, who, the better to carry out the daring plot he had formed in connection with Aces-and, had taken his life in his hands and thus braved almost certain death.

Timing his approach to the ruins, he dashed swiftly out from behind the nearest corral, reining in his horse just where the morning sun would fall clearest upon his figure and face, the latter fully revealed by the pinned-up front of his broad felt hat.

He made no motion when Top Dancer flung out his revolver, though he must have seen the gesture and taken in the purport of that angry ejaculation. And when the cowboys pulled their guns he showed no sign of fear, made no attempt to turn in flight, simply throwing up an empty hand and shouting in a clear, reckless voice:

"Keep your linen on, gentlemen! It's not Johnny-jump-up alone that you are firing at, but two women and three children—a kid full on queens!"

Only that, but it was more than sufficient. Both Dan Brown and Sol Scott divined his meaning only too well, and their voices rose in sharp and stern warning to their excited men:

"Hold! fire not a shot on your lives!"

"Down with your guns! I'll riddle the man that refuses!"

They leaped in among their confused followers, and knocked the revolvers to the right and left, repeating their commands in still sterner tones. And all the time Johnny-jump-up sat his horse, his womanly-beautiful face lighted up with a smile of mingled amusement and contempt.

Top Dancer, grating his teeth with dogged savageness, struggled to rise at least far enough to repeat the shot wasted by his weakness. He could push himself to a partially erect position with the aid of both hands, added to his indomitable will, but as often as he would try to lift his weapon the weight of his body would prove too much for one arm, and he would drop upon his face, only to renew the bitter struggle.

"Somebody put his heel on the head of that broken-backed snake under the tree," impudently cried Johnny-jump-up, touching his horse with the spur and leisurely advancing when assured that all present danger was past.

"One of your victims, I more than suspect," coldly uttered Dan Brown of Denver, moving forward to meet the villain.

"I dare say," drawled the desperado, covertly though keenly summing up the detective with his keen blue eyes. "Of course, if you say so," with a bow of mock courtesy, "though it's seldom I leave any botchwork lying around loose. If I might advise, I would—"

Sol Scott reached up and lightly tapped the mocking lips with the back of his hand. A hard smile curled his drooping mustaches as he saw the hot flush leap into the face before him, as he saw the gloved right hand drop to a revolver butt as though to instantly avenge the insult.

But Johnny-jump-up did not draw a weapon. It was more the reddish glow in those two pair of eyes, than the warning muttering which went up from the vengeful cowboys, that held him in check.

"You are one of a dozen big fellows, while I am alone," Johnny-jump-up uttered, his tones smooth as silk, his voice low and even. "Before I could draw a weapon, your hired bullies would riddle me with their guns. You know this, else you would not have sand enough, even if counterfeit, to strike me thus."

Dan Brown caught his pard by the arm, but his fears of an explosion were without foundation in fact. Sol Scott simply smiled his contempt, then spoke coldly:

"You were throwing out slurs against a man one hair from whose head is worth a thousand-fold your entire carcass. You shut him down without giving him a chance to defend himself, and—"

"There were three other fellows with him, if I'm not out in my memory for faces," lightly retorted Johnny-jump-up. "All armed, all suspicious of yours truly. I was alone, yet they went down for keeps. Does that look much like cowardice, Mister Man?"

"Let that pass for the present, pard," said Dan Brown, his fingers closing more rigidly as he felt the muscles beneath swell and quiver. "And you, dog! show little sense in calling up your dastardly exploits."

Johnny-jump-up laughed softly, meeting the fiery gaze without even the first sign of uneasiness, shame or fear. And his voice was by far the most careless of the trio as he uttered, lazily:

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

As it was when originally uttered, this immortal conundrum was a puzzle not so readily solved by those to whom it was put, and once more the lips that pronounced it smiled maliciously.

"You would like to repeat that blow in deadly earnest, Sol Scott. You would like to shoot me down like a dog. It would be pleasure most ecstatic were you free to cut and carve with your good knife until I might pass for hotel hash

or boarding-house mince-meat. And you, Dan Brown of Denver, bloodsucker, sleuth-hound, fattener on head money! you would ask for no greater boon in life than the privilege of standing by as a witness while your hired bullies made of poor me a Roman holiday! And why starve your appetites? Why hold your hands? Why hunger when before you lies such a delicious feast?"

He ceased his taunt, removing his hat and running his gloved fingers through the soft, silken mass of curling locks, his face beautiful as that of a pictured angel.

Stern and Silent stood Sol Scott and Dan Brown of Denver. If either were stung by his mocking words, nothing showed the wound. If they longed to tear him from his saddle and trample life out beneath their feet, only the reddish glow in their eyes betrayed the fact, and that but to the taunting devil who sat before them.

A soft, bubbling laugh parted his red lips.

"Because you know that five other lives are bound up in mine. Because you know that when I fall a victim to your hot vengeance, five other souls will bear mine company to the glorious—"

Dan Brown placed one hand on the little desperado's thigh, his fingers closing until they threatened to penetrate cloth and flesh, until Johnny-jump-up, gritty though he had and was showing himself, flinched with pain.

"You have said enough, you scoundrel!" gratingly muttered the detective, his eyes aglow, his face showing how hard it was for him to keep from going further. "Don't soil their names by coupling their innocence and purity with your shameless turpitude. Don't crowd us too far, or even their lives may not protect you longer."

"It is for me to deal the cards, not you, Dan Brown," retorted Johnny-jump-up, quickly recovering from his temporary discomfiture. "You haven't a word to say until your betters are served, and then you have to take just what is given you. Bear this point in mind as we go along, will you? It may save you some trouble in the end."

The two detectives interchanged quick glances. They had arrived at the same conclusion, and Dan Brown spoke again:

"You are the messenger spoken of in this note, signed Aces-and?"

"My brother—yes."

"That, of course. Two such devilish scoundrels could only come of one common stock. But a truce to compliments, and down to business. You have terms to offer?"

"To impose, you mean," insolently corrected Johnny-jump-up.

"That word, if it likes you better," coldly responded Dan Brown. "You admit that you are one of the gang, then?"

"And proud of it," was the prompt boast. "I do belong to the same gang of horse-thieves, robbers, throat-slitters and law-breakers in general which you have been hunting from pillar to post for so many busy months. My brother is its chief. I am his right hand, and perform the work as his brain lays it out."

"It was to hasten my mission that I called you away from your chosen field, bloodhound. It cost a trifle," and he laughed softly as he glanced over the ruins of Single Pot Ranch, "but I knew you had a mighty rich wife, and could stand the pressure."

"You set the ranch afire, then?" quietly asked Dan Brown.

"Of course," was the impudent admission. "For certain reasons which it is hardly necessary for me to mention, I did not care about cutting the bonds of your bully boys with my own hand. I knew that other eyes than theirs would quickly sight a red light, and so—you see—the ranch had to go."

"It performed all you anticipated, then?"

"That, and more," was the admission, and for the first time since his coming, Johnny-jump-up permitted a trace of wondering curiosity to show itself in his face and eyes as he keenly scrutinized the two detectives. "I wanted the dogs set free that they might carry the news to you in a hurry; but I didn't expect them to find you quite so soon."

"You may meet with other surprises before your head turns gray, Johnny-jump-up," grimly laughed Dan Brown. "But to—"

"Send some of your dogs to muzzle that snarling cur, over yonder!" sharply uttered the desperado, pointing toward Top Dancer who, all this time, had not relaxed his efforts to secure a second shot at the man who had so wantonly shot him down while in the performance of his duty.

Finding it impossible to lift his nearly paralyzed body and support it with one hand and arm, Top Dancer, grating his teeth with savage resolution, choking back the deathly pain and faintness the exertion occasioned, turned over on his side and with his right elbow resting on the ground, was essaying to steady the heavy weapon for a death shot.

Sol Scott moved swiftly over to where Top Dancer lay, and gently removed the weapon from his failing grasp. He stooped low and seemed to be speaking earnestly to the wounded cow-

boy, but his words were inaudible to the sharply listening desperado. Better for him, perhaps, had such not been the case!

"He stole the madam—and the child!" panted Dancer, faintly as to voice, but with a strength of hatred and revenge that almost startled the detective. "He butchered the boys. He shot me down. I don't care so much for that. But the rest—I want to pay him. Let me get square—and I'll die easy! Just one shot!"

"Even though that shot dooms your mistress and her little babe to death?" whispered the detective, his eyes dimming, his voice shaken as no living foe had ever heard it. "They are held as hostages for his safety, Dancer. If he fails to return with a report, they will suffer."

"Not if you move swift," gasped the wounded man. "Disguise—as you know so well. Surprise the devils! They won't—look for it—so soon. Kill him—"

Sol Scott bent his head lower until his lips almost touched the ear of the cowboy, then hurriedly whispered:

"There are more ways of getting even than through a bullet, Top! If you wait, you may live to see this. Keep quiet. That running devil is watching you. Nurse back your strength, for if things come to the pass I firmly believe, you may want to have a finger in the pie."

"Swear it, boss!" gasped the wounded man, the fire deepening in his sunken eyes. "Swear I may help to—"

"You shall, never fear," and with a parting pressure of the feverish hand, Sol Scott added: "Believe this, instead of the words I am about to utter. I want that devil to hear them, to throw him off the right scent. If you understand, press my hand."

He felt the feeble pressure, and then drew back a pace or two, folding his arms over his swelling bosom, a grave, serious look on his handsome countenance as he spoke in tones a trifle louder than any he had before used:

"I can't blame you, my man, when I remember all you have suffered through that infernal bloodhound! And yet—if you knew that your revenge could only be gained through the death or at least the brutal treatment of others—of the helpless and innocent—of your mistress and her poor little child, Dancer? If you knew that the death of yonder vile scoundrel meant death to them, as well, would you still ask it of me, old fellow?"

"No, I wouldn't," was the quick reply, in tones of surprising clearness, coming as they did from one whom all around considered already on the verge of the grave.

"He swears it is so, and I believe him. He wouldn't risk his life within reach of our hands, if he hadn't some such safeguard."

"Let him go, for now. If I can do anything—for their sakes—I'm only too glad. But, boss!"

"Well, my good fellow?"

"You won't forget him. Time will come—when he must pay for it all. Then—score him one—for Top Dancer, boss!"

"I will, as Heaven hears me!" cried Sol Scott, his clinched right hand raised toward the zenith.

"That's all—right. I'm—satisfied, boss!"

Worn out, the wounded cowboy leaned back against the tree-trunk to which Sol Scott had restored him, and his eyes closed. He looked more like a dead man than one living, and as Sol Scott bade two of the men go to him and nurse him back to strength, if possible, they hastily moved forward, while the detective retraced his steps to where Dan Brown and Johnny-jump-up had been silently watching his movements.

As Sol Scott came up, the desperado with a sneer uttered:

"Did you succeed in soothing the big baby, my fine fellow? Does he still insist on having my scalp?"

"I made him a pledge that satisfied him," was the quiet response. "Are you anxious to learn what that was?"

"Suit yourself," was the careless reply. "I'm satisfied with the cards I hold, and know that you dare not jump the game, or play a bluff, without first obtaining my permission. For once you have met your master, Sol Scott. Which includes you, too, Dan Brown!"

"The game is not played to an end yet."

"Or you would be standing here, stripped to the buff!" with a hard and merciless laugh. "You would be poorer than the poorest man among these gentle tail-twisters! You would not have a dollar to cross yourself with! A hoof nor a horn to console you while dreaming of the past, when you could wallow in riches! Ended? Not much, my dear Mr. Brown! It has only just begun!"

"So much the worse for you," steadily retorted Dan Brown.

"Because there is still a chance for you to lose, invincible as you seem to think the hand you have drawn from the deck," added Sol Scott. "We have played the game before this, and you are bucking against the men your own class first dubbed THE ROYAL FLUSH!"

Johnny-jump-up laughed mockingly, no whit disconcerted.

"Since then common sense has got out a revised edition of Hoyle, and straights are barred. We hold a full hand—a kid full on queens, to be more explicit, and your ordinary flush must knuckle down before that!"

"The first deal don't always settle a game, though," and Sol Scott smiled with a certain grim significance. "Aces-and said it was to be a game of freeze-out, for blood. All right. So be it! We're in the game, and we'll play it to the bitter end! I never yet let a man remain in my debt for many days, and I'll not begin with you, John Sand!"

"Is this a threat, my dear fellow?" drawled Johnny-jump-up.

"It is a vow—the same oath I gave that poor fellow over yonder, when he renounced his right to take your vile life," sternly uttered the detective, with a glance toward Top Dancer. "When I told him your fellow-devils held our dear and helpless ones as hostages for your safe return, he nobly gave over his longing for revenge. And to reward him I swore that I would in good time square accounts with you. I swore to remember him when that glad time came, and to make you suffer one pang for him. And, as high heaven hears and records my oath! I will make it good before I die!"

Johnny-jump-up laughed lightly, his womanish countenance beaming mild and serene as that of a cherubim.

"I've heard better men than you swear to the same end, Sol Scott, and still I am in the land of the living."

"Other men may not have had as bitter cause."

"All the same, I hope you didn't swear that you would kill me."

"Why so, if I may ask?"

"Because you would be swearing to a lie," was the cold retort, as Johnny-jump-up proceeded to roll up another cigarette.

CHAPTER XI.

RUNNING OVER THE STAKES.

THE cowboys were gathered near enough to catch nearly every word uttered by Johnny-jump-up and the two detectives. They listened with the most intense interest.

They heard him flatly give the lie to Sol Scott, and their breath came short and quick, for 'now he has done it!' they surely believed. They looked to see the athletic detective leap at his throat and drag him from the saddle—to see the insolent varlet checked by blow or shot—but nothing of the sort occurred. Instead, Sol Scott only bowed, his face cold and unmoved, his tones even and unshaken:

"Your tongue is no scandal, John Sand. Time will show which one of us has spoken falsely. If me, it will be the first time in all my life that I ever broke pledge to either friend or foe."

"Talk is cheap, but it takes ducats to come in," retorted Johnny-jump-up with an airy wave of his gloved hand.

The cowboys interchanged glances of surly disappointment, and one of them, tall, athletic, a pet of the Single Pot Ranch, muttered to honest Ben Jimson:

"Whar's your brags on Sol Scott come in now, Benny, boy? Tuck the lie from that durned little squirt, an' is chawin' onto it till yit! Ef it'd bin our boss, we'd hev a skelp fer a dance afore the lie could 'a' dried on the dirty whelp's lips!"

Ben's face flushed hotly, and there was an indignant moisture in his big eyes as he replied, in the same guarded tone:

"Play fa'r ef it breaks you, man! You know them imps o' hell hev got the madam an' her kid foul. What kin the boss do when he knows all the damidges must come out o' them? Wait. I'm a liar from head-waters ef Johnny-jump-up ain't cuttin' his own throat afore he sees the last o' this bit o' bluff!"

"Here's hopin' it," was the prompt response. "Ef he'd only say that to our boss, though! Good Lawd! you'd think a ton of dynamite hed bu'sted right in the middle o' whar he lives! The low-down cuss!"

There was a brief silence following the last remark of Johnny-jump-up's, during which the brother detectives interchanged glances, as though each wished to divine the conclusion his mate had arrived at before making any positive movement. Then Dan Brown spoke:

"You say you are the messenger mentioned by Aces-and in this note of his. If so, you probably understand just what game he is playing?"

"I should, since I did a goodly share of the planning," was the prompt retort as Johnny-jump-up showed his white teeth in a mocking smile. "I hope you'll not forget that little circumstance when you two gentlemen make your testaments!"

"If you are on top of the earth at that time, be sure we will not," quietly retorted Dan Brown.

"Thank you for nothing," laughed the malicious desperado, then abruptly adding: "The sun is growing uncomfortably warm, and I

never could talk business save in a cool spot. Tell some of your bullies to drag that carrion away, to make room for his betters."

Johnny-jump-up nodded toward Top Dancer, whose sunken eyes were steadily watching the trio.

Sol Scott turned paler than ever, a deadly light flashing into his eyes, his hands involuntarily closing. Dan Brown flushed hotly at the open insolence of the ruffian, and Johnny-jump-up would almost certainly have found himself on the wrong side of prudence, but for the voluntary action of the wounded cowboy.

His hatred-sharpened hearing caught and comprehended those brutal words, and in a husky whisper he bade his mates lift him up and bear him from beneath the shady tree. In silence they complied, pausing with their burden when opposite the malicious demon. In slow, steady accents Top Dancer addressed the scoundrel:

"I'll get out of your road, you cur, for I can see you are racing to the grave—digging it with your foul tongue! Keep on as you have begun, and dying though I am, I'll spit on your cold carcass before my eyes close for the last time!"

At a sign, his mates bore him on, gently lowering him to the earth at the base of a corral fence where the shade was wide enough to cover him for the time being.

Johnny-jump-up made no reply to this speech, and his mocking smile fled from his face. Perhaps he felt the truth of the words uttered by the seemingly dying man. In his bitter hatred for these two men who had given him and his so much uneasiness of body and spirit during the past few months, he had allowed himself to go too far. Despite the nature of his armor, he began to feel a secret uneasiness as he saw the stern, deadly light burning in those blue eyes. Yet he showed naught of this outwardly. He dared not change his line too abruptly, lest his fears produce the very effect he was secretly dreading.

"Babies, fools and moribunds are privileged characters, and the law allows them to say whatever comes to their tongues," he said, with a low, musical laugh and careless out-flinging of one gloved hand. "A man is an ass who holds a grudge after he is physically past the power to wipe it out on his enemy; he is worse than a fool if he pays any attention to the snarling of a defeated adversary. Good-by, Top Dancer! May you live to see that my grave is kept green!"

"Stranger things than that have come to pass!" muttered Sol Scott with a short, hard laugh.

"And nothing would delight you more than to see the miracle repeated in my case, eh?" sneered Johnny-jump-up, casting aside the end of his cigarette and settling himself in the saddle.

"I'd say that was the truth, only you do not choke to death."

"A truce to compliments," sharply cried the little desperado, as he moved toward the lone tree, drawing rein 'neath its spreading branches, leaping to the ground and leaning carelessly against the trunk, all mockery vanishing from his bright blue eyes. "I came here on business, and the quicker we get down to sober work, the sooner we will arrive at a complete understanding."

"We are waiting your pleasure, and have been for an hour," bluntly retorted Dan Brown, facing the rascal coolly enough, though the fire in his eyes told of powerful passions raging beneath that calm exterior.

"As I intended you should," and a flash of devilish hatred filled the rascal's eyes. "For months past you have been posing as heroes, as little gods on earth! You have made the poor fools who call themselves honest men, believe you prodigies of bravery, skill, cunning and sand. You bade them watch while you swept the vile scum before you as a cyclone clears away underbrush! You told them that when the campaign once begun, the thieves should know no rest, receive no quarter; that you would keep them too busy in seeking to save their lives to even think of striking back. Among those who implicitly believed your boasts, were these gentlemen," with a mocking bow toward the cowboys who were so eagerly watching and listening.

"Possibly you believed what you said. You may have counted on making your proud boasts good, but for all that they were lies. To show you this, is one of my reasons for making you this call. One man, and he hardly half your size and weight—one of those whom you were to make break their neck in fleeing from your wrath—comes here and flings that lie back in your teeth! Tells you flatly that he is a better man than the best in all your boasted Royal Flush!"

"Is that all you have to say?" coldly asked Dan Brown, as the little desperado paused to catch his breath after this outburst.

"Alone I came to you, and single-handed I can bluff you down. I have insulted you time and again. I have brought the flush of shame to your brazen cheeks. I have caused your servants to stare in wonder at the sight of two such

mighty fighters quailing before one little man. And in doing all this, I have partly repaid the injury you and yours have done me and mine. Only partly, though! Before I get through, the old scores will be wiped out, and the balance will stand on the other side of the page!"

"And this is what you call business?" again asked Dan Brown, his voice as even as ever, his face cold and immobile.

Johnny-jump-up bit his lip until his white teeth showed traces of blood. He felt that his triumph was curtailed, and far from complete.

But only for a single breath. Then he laughed lightly, the dark frown vanishing from his brow, his hard tones growing soft and musical once more.

"It would lead to business in a hurry, if I were lucky enough to have men to deal with, instead of wind-bags," with a mocking smile. "But since your stomachs are too weak for such fodder, we'll change the game a little to give you another chance."

"Yes, I am the messenger sent by Aces-and. Are you ready to listen to his terms?"

"We are ready to listen to your terms," said Dan Brown, coldly. "Of course ransom is your object?"

"Mainly, of course," was the prompt response. "With revenge as a sort of side bet, you understand."

"What terms do you propose?"

"First, let me run over our hand. We hold your wife and her two children. To make up the full hand, we have the wife of Sol Scott and her little girl. Each of them has a very fine head of hair, as I took particular notice. Well, we'll be satisfied to call the account square when you pay us over one dollar for each and every hair there is in the lot combined!"

As he spoke Johnny-jump-up smiled maliciously, watching his adversaries closely, as though anticipating an outburst of indignant surprise. But the surprise was his instead. In grave silence the two detectives listened, and as gravely seemed to weigh his words before giving their decision.

"In what manner is the transfer to be made, when the ransom money demanded is paid?" inquired Dan Brown. "As you are too treacherous and evil-spirited to be trusted, just so you would be unwilling to trust us. Of course you have duly considered this point?"

"Of course," was the careless, off-hand reply. "We hold the women and their kids. If we surrender them it will only be after we have the full equivalent in our hands. Even you wouldn't have the cheek to ask any other terms."

"Speak for yourself, John Sand. You are not qualified by nature to answer for a man of honor."

Despite his nerve and natural assurance, the little desperado flushed a trifle at this quiet hit. A devilish glitter flashed into his eyes, and he seemed on the point of breaking out into a savage retort; but he seemed to think better of it, and forced a laugh.

"I might come back at you with the moldy chestnut of 'no gentleman,' but I refrain. Time is too valuable for wasting in idle compliments, right or left-handed. You know our conditions—money down, and secure in our possession before the goods are turned over to you. Do you take it, or am I to carry back word that you hold money dearer than you do your own flesh and blood?"

"If we did think so, you would hardly be in fit condition to either carry or deliver a message. We would begin our vengeance with you!"

"That is too diaphanous, old fellow," laughed the rascal, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Aces-and hinted at something of the sort when I proposed to act as go-between, but I soon brushed the cobwebs out of his brain. I told him, as I tell you, that my life was safer in your company than any other place. Elsewhere, accidents might befall me, and no one strain themselves to save my neck. But while you felt that on my safety depended the lives of your dear ones, you would guard my life even more carefully than your own. For, if I don't return to Aces-and within a certain length of time—Well, I leave you to picture the doom which will certainly overtake your loved ones, and the two fair women in particular."

It was risky work, this—something like pulling the tail of a lion while one's head rests between his jaws; but Johnny-jump-up felt that he held a hand that fully justified him in bluffing boldly.

"To put it plainly, my meek bloodhound, you've got to trust us just as far as we ask. There is no other lead open to you with the cards distributed as they now are."

"You are authorized to conclude the bargain, then?"

"Well, not exactly," hesitated Johnny-jump-up. "I could, of course, and Aces would confirm whatever arrangement I might see fit to make; but I prefer dividing up the responsibility a bit."

"Then why have you come to us?"

"Simply to tell you how the game stands, and to let you have a sly peep at our cards," was the prompt reply. "To tell you that money will buy back your missing treasures, while any at-

tempt at bluffing will just as surely doom them to death—or worse. Is that plain enough?"

"As far as it goes."

"What more do you want to know?"

"When and where we can meet the real head of this gang," interposed Sol Scott, sternly. "We have had enough of you and your insolence. We bore with it patiently, thinking you the principal villain, or at least one invested with the power to complete the bargain and transfer. Now we will do business only with Aces-and himself."

"You will treat with him only through me," was the cool retort. "You will give me your answer to take back to him. You will wait patiently until I see fit to come back with his final terms. If you dare to cut up rusty—if you make a single attempt to follow the trail left by Aces-and, or to send a spy after me—you will never see your dear ones again, living or dead!"

Sharply and decisively were the last words uttered, and Johnny-jump-up plainly mean business now.

"These are your orders, gentlemen," he added, suddenly calming down but still speaking with stern decision. "You will remain here or at the ranch belonging to Sol Scott, if you prefer shelter. If you leave the premises for a single mile, I will know of it, and those in our power will pay the penalty of your disobedience."

Sol Scott could no longer contain himself, and with a single step he was upon the desperado, one hand clutching his throat with a deadly gripe, the other menacing his suddenly flushed face.

"You cur!" he snarled savagely. "If a single hair of their dear heads is injured, look out! Ten thousand deaths shall be yours!"

A touch from Dan Brown's hand caused the mad detective to relax his fierce grasp, freeing his adversary and falling back. None too soon either. The gloved hand was closing over the haft of a knife, and feeling that death was surely to be his portion, Johnny-jump-up would have stricken viciously for vengeance.

As it was, the weapon remained in its scabbard, while a sickly smile crept over his flushed countenance, his blue eyes turning almost black with a deadly hatred as he uttered:

"One death at a time, my dear fellow! The stock would last longer at that rate, and the result amount to the same in the end. Bah!" and he laughed, harshly, his brows contracting, his face turning fairly repulsive with devilish hatred and wickedness.

"You may threaten, but we will perform. You have our terms, and all that remains is for you to accept or to reject them, for they will not be modified in the slightest degree."

"I am to be permitted to take my departure whenever my sweet will dictates. You are to possess your souls in patience and wait for my return. You are to lay idle. You must not leave the ranch on any pretext. You shall not send out a scout or a spy, to mark my trail, or for any other purpose. You shall not send out for assistance."

"If you transgress these orders in a single respect, I will know of it almost immediately, and our hostages will be the sufferers. And now, Messrs. Bloodhounds, I am ready to receive your decision."

Dan Brown touched his brother detective on the arm and drew him away from the tree. He stood with his back turned toward the desperado, and before he spoke to his partner he cast a slow, searching glance around the horizon, as though in expectation of seeing some one coming. If so, he was doomed to disappointment, for the sky-line was without a break save those made by purely natural objects.

Johnny-jump-up watched his adversaries in this strange game with cool intentness, but he could not catch a word, nor read their sentiments from their partially hidden faces. Nor was he any wiser when the two men returned and Dan Brown spoke:

"If we refuse to agree to your conditions, what then?"

"Just this," was the prompt retort. "I will return to Aces-and, and before him tell your loved ones that you prize money above their freedom. And then—I leave you to guess the consequences!"

CHAPTER XII.

GOING IT BLIND.

As he spoke, Johnny-jump-up watched Sol Scott keenly, evidently half suspecting another enraged assault, for his right hand rested on the haft of his knife; but stern and still the detective permitted his partner to conduct the negotiations for the time being.

"When will Aces-and expect your return with an answer?"

Johnny-jump-up laughed softly, and the quick gleam in his eyes told his adversaries how closely he was watching for a trap.

"Any time that suits me best, provided it does not extend over six and thirty hours from my leaving him. That took place last night, in the shank of the evening; say twelve hours ago, more or less. If I am not with him by this time to-morrow, good-bye to kids and petticoats!"

Dan Brown moved closer to the desperado,

one hand falling lightly on his shoulder. Johnny-jump-up swiftly flashed forth his steel, drawing back his armed hand to a position from whence he could strike swift and sure, before a hand could arrest the blow. From his pale, hard-set features, it was clear he anticipated a savage assault, something like that which he had recently experienced at the hands of Sol Scott.

But Dan Brown made no attempt toward that end. If he saw the bare steel, no change in his grave earnest countenance bore witness to that fact. His grasp did not tighten, nor his free hand seek either weapon or to guard his own life. And when he spoke his tones were smooth and even, free from excitement or anger.

"This is no time for a misunderstanding, John Sand. There is by far too much at stake. Neither your side nor ours can afford to fall into an error through hot passions or hasty decisions."

The hard-set features of the little desperado began to soften and relax a little, though he still held his weapon in readiness for instant use in case of necessity.

"Well, what of it?" a little sharply uttered Johnny-jump-up.

This abrupt change in the demeanor of his antagonists "rattled" him a little, for he was puzzled to guess just what it meant, just what course the detectives had concluded to pursue.

"You have our families in your power," coldly added Dan Brown, in the same quiet tones. "Precious as they are to us, to you money is far preferable, for reasons which I needn't dwell upon."

"What are you driving at, anyhow?" growled the suspicious rascal.

"If all the world was coined into golden coins it would not begin to weigh a thousandth part as much as our love for the beings you hold captive," continued those smooth, even tones.

"And so, to give each one what they covet most, we agree to accept whatever terms your master may see fit to offer, provided he keeps within our power to pay. And still further provided that he will deliver his hostages at the same hour we pay over the money or its worth."

Johnny-jump-up laughed mockingly as Dan Brown of Denver ceased speaking.

"And out come the monkey from the meal-chest at last! Bah! when you get ahead of us, Dan Brown, it will be a frosty day in the tropics!"

"In other words?" quietly inquired the detective, his hand dropping from the desperado's shoulder, and he stepping back a pace.

"That we and not you are the ones to dictate terms. That you will not even see, much less place your hands on, your families until after their ransom is in our possession and our retreat to safety fully insured. These are my instructions, and you must accept or reject them just as they stand. Take your choice—and in making it, please bear in mind that when I take my departure the die is cast for good and all so far as you and yours are concerned."

"You are risking your own success by your hardness, sir," coldly responded Dan Brown.

"That is my lookout. No likey, no buy!" laughed Johnny-jump-up.

Dan Brown stood before the malicious villain for a brief space in silence, his eyes downcast, his brain busy, his brows contracted. Then he lifted his eyes and calmly uttered:

"I cannot accept your terms without consultation with my partner. Give us a few minutes in which to weigh the matter."

"As many as you wish, my dear fellow," and Johnny-jump-up flung out one gloved hand with a careless gesture.

Dan Brown made no reply, but taking Sol Scott by the arm, he moved slowly away from the shade cast by the tree, leaving Johnny-jump-up the sole occupant of the agreeable spot.

The little desperado seemed in earnest so far as his last request was concerned, for, with a long-drawn yawn, he tied his horse to the tip of a drooping bough, then lay down at the foot of the tree, pulling the broad brim of his hat over his face. One hand rested on the butt of a revolver, and one thumb touched the hammer. Clearly the rascal meant to take no long chances in his repose.

"What do you think of it, pard?" asked Dan Brown in a low tone.

"It looks bad—mighty bad!" was the almost savage response.

"You watched him while I kept him in play. What did you see?"

"Enough to convince me that I was right in my first opinion," was the instant response. "The gang is playing a desperate game, and they mean to beat us in every way they can. They think to get the ransom money, and still hold our dear ones!"

"I more than suspected as much!" muttered Dan Brown, gloomily. "If I could think different—if I could believe they meant to play fair—I would jump at his offer in a moment. You know it is not the love of money that holds me back. You know that I would strip myself of my last dollar—of everything I own on earth—for their sake. But I know that our darlings would be the last to ask such a sacrifice if they

knew what we more than suspect; that those hellhounds mean to extort the ransom and then hold their captives as a guard against our vengeance until they can escape far beyond our reach."

"Even then I would come to their terms, could I feel assured they would release our families when safe, as they imagined," was the gloomy response. "But would they, even then?"

"You don't think—"

Dan Brown did not complete the sentence, for the same fearful idea struck him that troubled his partner. Sol Scott nodded savagely, his hands clinching until the nails cut through the skin.

"You know how bitterly Aces-and hates our very names. You know he has sworn time and again to even scores with us before going off the roll. He is no fool, no ordinary schemer. If nothing else, this bold game of his would prove that, but we have seen enough of his former exploits to make that much clear. He would not risk his precious neck even for a load of gold, if he couldn't see a way of escape open to him."

"That way, I firmly believe, lies in still keeping our families in his gripe after the ransom money is paid. He knows our love for them will be no less then. If his knife is held at their throats, we will not dare close in with him. And then, when he has gained a point of safety, think you he would lose such a glorious chance of cutting us to the very soul?"

"You are right! he would butcher them, the demon!" muttered Dan Brown, his face hard and stern, yet despairing. "If my brain was only clear—if I could only think and plan as I once could!"

"You are worn out, mind and body, pard," gravely uttered Sol Scott, his hand seeking that of his brother detective, pressing it warmly, reassuringly. "You need rest, and—"

"Rest, with those fiends holding all I love on earth?" savagely breathed the husband and father, a light in his blue eyes that was but little short of insanity.

"It is hard!" muttered Sol Scott, brushing the drops from his brow with a hand that actually trembled. "It is a depth of bitterness such as I never imagined could engulf a living soul!"

"And not a ray of light to brighten it! Not a single gleam of hope, look where we will!"

He felt Sol Scott draw his athletic figure erect. He felt him quiver and thrill as one who is inhaling fresh hope, and glanced swiftly up to see his brother detective gazing beneath his curved palm far off over the plain to the east. One breathless moment, and then Dan Brown made the same discovery that had so thoroughly aroused his mate.

Far away, a mere speck on the prairie, was a single horseman, though only the eyes of experience could have been sure of that much. And the detectives knew that whoever that rider might be, he was approaching the spot where had stood Single Pot Ranch.

"It is one of the boys," muttered Sol Scott, his stern face lighting up marvelously. "No matter which, his brain will be cool and clear in comparison with ours. He will see the way better than we can."

"If it is Enoch!" muttered Dan Brown, his hands clinching tightly. "If it is Enoch Dodge, I will be content to take his advice without question!"

Sol Scott cast a swift glance toward the lone tree. Johnny-jump-up half-lay, half-leaned there, seemingly peacefully sleeping. If this was pretense, it was admirably played.

"See that he don't make a break for it, pard!" warningly muttered Sol Scott. "I'm going to take a horse out to meet whoever it is."

He did not pause for comment or reply, but hastened to where the horses were held by a few cowboys, selecting a couple and leaping into the saddle of one, leading the other, dashed away to meet the new-comer.

Even as he started, a low murmur of excitement ran through the group, for they saw the distant rider come in a heap to the ground as though his overtaken steed had stumbled. It was more than that, as they one and all knew the next moment. The rider rose alone, and they knew his mount must have fallen dead, as he set out on foot, running like one on whose speed rested life or death.

"It is Enoch, God bless him!" panted Dan Brown, then casting a quick glance toward Johnny-jump-up.

The desperado had not moved, and the position of his hat showed plainly enough that he could not yet have caught a glimpse of the approaching detective. His breath came low, even and peaceful. Strange as it may appear, Johnny-jump-up had actually gone to sleep in the midst of his enemies, each and every one of whom would have given a year of life for the privilege of cutting his throat.

In silence Dan Brown moved toward the cowboys, and singling out Frank Munson, the man who first intercepted the three marauders when they approached the ranch, and West Long, he bade them keep guard over Johnny-jump-up.

"Don't injure him, as you love your lives; but if he rouses up before I get back, keep him

here. Use force if necessary, though I don't much think he'll try to get off without our last answer."

"You bet he'll be hyar when you want him, boss!"

Dan Brown did not wait for this response, but mounting a fresh horse, he dashed away to meet his old friend, Enoch Dodge.

To those who are familiar with the preceding stories of Dan Brown and Sol Scott it would be superfluous to dwell upon the sterling qualities of Enoch Dodge, Marshal of Grenada when Dan Brown first made his bow to the public, and afterward mayor of his favorite mining-town. It is enough to say that the "heart of gold" was true and faithful as ever.

When the brother detectives took the field against the audacious gang of "rustlers" and criminals who had had their own way for over a year in that region, they did not act until their plans were well laid and all ready to press matters to a finish.

To insure success, they wrote to Enoch Dodge to pay them a long-promised visit, and immediately pressed that genial worthy into service, not a little to his delight. Another letter brought Nor' West Nick from Rocky Bar, and with him came none other than the big ex-pugilist, Turk Elder, who had so nobly seconded Dan Brown and Sol Scott at Red Rock. Then the united team began the brisk operation which soon gained for them the title of "THE ROYAL FLUSH," and won for them the undying enmity of Aces-and and his particular following.

Tall, gaunt, Yankeeified as ever was Enoch Dodge when Dan Brown met him in company with Sol Scott, freshly mounted and rapidly spurring toward the ruins of the Single Pot Ranch. But there was renewed life and courage in the warm grip with which he caught the hand of the haggard detective, and Dan Brown felt it go tingling through his veins.

"They's bin a little ole hell to pay, I see!" grimly muttered Enoch, his keen gray eyes roving over the scene of desolation. "Sol told me enough to chaw on. Don't you worry. Things is boun' to come out all right in the eend. Ef we can't pull 'em quite to rights fu'st off, the boys is comin' to make up what we lack."

"Nick and Turk?"

"Comin' as fast as hoss-flesh kin tote 'em, be sure," was the prompt response, as Dodge turned for a glance over his shoulder. "They don't ride as light as the ole man, but they won't be much ahind 'im. They hed two critters like me, an' knowed they was more'n the wu'th o' hoss-critter dependin' on fast time."

"You saw Bill Hampton and his outfit, then?"

"Sart'in. The signals tuck us thar, not two hours after you left. We got extry mounts, an' rid 'em fer all they was wu'th."

Sol Scott uttered a sharp exclamation as he for the first time remembered Dough-ball Jimmy and the pledge he had given him.

"You didn't see—they hadn't been hanging anybody there?"

"Dough-ball Jimmy, you mean? Bill told me to tell you they jes' give the pizen critter a few licks with thar ropes, an' told him to pull foot out o' thar jurisdiction the quickest the law 'lowed him."

Even in his own sore trouble this report comforted Sol Scott. And it may be mentioned here that he never knew that Bill Hampton had sent him a false report.

The trio of friends were now within a short distance of the tree beneath which Johnny-jump-up still lay, peacefully slumbering, and as they reined in their mounts, Enoch Dodge said:

"It mought be a good idee to send a couple o' the boys on my back trail with led hosses fer Nick an' Turk. Ten to one they're afoot. We'll need 'em afore this muddle is clared up, I reckon."

Dan Brown quickly acted on this hint, and when the cowboys rode off on their mission, the three men passed around to the further side of the tree, there to consult and decide on their immediate plan of action.

In a few words as possible the brother detectives told their shrewd old friend all that had transpired up to the moment when they first espied his approach. Silently Enoch Dodge listened, and then, while the sorely-tortured detectives watched him and looked for a consoling answer, he stood with bowed head, vigorously chewing tobacco, spitting with cool accuracy at a little ant hill near by, to the utter discomfiture of its inhabitants.

"Well, not a word of comfort, old friend?" at length uttered Dan Brown, his face full of painful anxiety, his eyes wild and like those of a hunted man.

"It's a nasty pickle—the nastiest I ever run into, mate," was the frank response. "I'm feared you was right when you sot down that dirty galoot fer a fraud from 'way back! He don't mean to play the game anyway fa'r. They mean to grab all they kin an' keep all they've got into the barg'in!"

"Not while I live!" doggedly uttered Dan Brown, his heart sinking after a fashion very unusual for one of his naturally sanguine disposition.

"I didn't say they would do it, mate, but that's what they 'lowed to do," was the quiet re-

sponse. "I reckon we kin best the critters when it comes down to raal hard playin' fer keeps, but it's a nasty pickle, as I said afore—a mighty nasty pickle."

Enoch Dodge was simply talking to keep his comrades in play. His cool, keen brain was busily revolving the case over and over, untangling the knotted threads and smoothing them out so he could trace any particular one from its beginning to its end if necessary.

The brother detectives began to realize something of this, and they choked back their impatience as best they could, contenting themselves to wait until the oracle should see fit to speak to the point.

Before this came to pass, Sol Scott caught sight of the returning horsemen, and his glad ejaculation seemed to rouse Enoch Dodge.

"I say, mates, you've got two or three men in the bunch you can bet high on 'thout much fear o' thar goin' back onto ye?"

"I would answer for any one of my employes," promptly replied Dan Brown, only to be greeted by a shrug from those bowed shoulders.

"It's a good thing fer to hev a heap o' confidence in a feller's 'stablishment, but it's wu'th a heap more to be dead sure, even if you hev to do a bit o' suspectin'," dryly retorted Enoch Dodge. "That pizen critter as good as told ye he hed spies on the watch, ready fer to pass him word ef you tried to double onto him."

"He was lying."

"Mebbe yes, but mebbe not. It won't do no hurt to act as if he was slingin' gospel truth at ye; best be on the safe side o' the bars."

"Why do you ask? What do you want of the boys?"

"I want you to send off the hull heap an' b'il-in' of 'em, to whar they cain't see jes' what we do to that pizen critter of a Jump-up Johnny. Round 'em up in one o' the corrals, fer lack of a better place, an' set a couple or three o' your best men to watchin' that they don't none on 'em take to peekin' afore they're give leave."

"You mean to—"

"Never you mind, honey," was the cool interruption. "He said this was a game of freeze-out. You play we was goin' it blind, an' do jest as the ole man tells ye. Will you, lad?"

"Yes," firmly cried Dan Brown, as he grasped the extended hand and pressed it warmly. "I know you are true as steel, and your brain is a heap clearer than either of ours. You too, Sol?"

"Me too," was the quiet response.

"Then git down to work. You, Scott, go out an' meet the boys. Dan, pick your men an' git the rest under kiver. 'I'll look out fer the rest o' the little game."

Having once yielded, neither Dan nor Sol wasted any time in executing their orders. Brown selected West Long, Frank Munson and Ben Jimson to act as guards or patrols, and giving them their instructions, in a few well-chosen words, made the remainder understand that while no one among them was suspected of any wrong, it was deemed best for the dear ones held in captivity for them to lie quiet, as though sent away from the spot when Johnny-jump-up should awaken.

Sol Scott hastened out to meet the remaining two members of the Royal Flush, Nor' West Nick and Turk Elder. And taking them under his charge, he bade the men escorting them to at once report to Dan Brown.

Scarcely had all this been arranged, and the men stowed away in a distant corral, where it would be impossible for them to obtain even a glimpse of what was transpiring under the lone tree, than Johnny-jump-up awakened, stretching himself with a prolonged yawn.

"Feel a heap better, don't ye, stranger?" asked a quiet voice that caused him to leap to his feet with a startled ejaculation, to find Enoch Dodge smiling grimly upon him. "Hope I didn't roust ye up out o' your snooze, stranger? Was just takin' a mind photograph o' you so I could paint a devil in my next pictur' o' life in the Far West."

"Of the Royal Flush going bu'st in a game of freeze-out?" laughed Johnny-jump-up with admirable coolness.

In truth he was startled far more than he would have been willing to acknowledge even to himself. The speedy coming of Dan Brown and Sol Scott had amazed him, for he could not even guess how they came to get wind of the affair so soon after it occurred. And now he saw the three men who went to make up the Royal Flush, all together, all watching him with more intentness than love or respect.

Nor' West Nick was there, fat as ever, with a still more enormous pair of mustaches curling fiercely back to his ears. But in no other respect the same Nor' West Nick whom we first met at Rocky Bar, at least to the outward eye.

Then he seemed the typical bummer and dead beat, dirty, frowsy, ragged and disreputable in every respect. Now he was neatly dressed in a modified cowboy costume, his enormous waist encircled by a broad belt of stamped leather, studded all around with cartridges, and supporting a knife and brace of heavy revolvers. His usually beaming countenance was grave and

stern, and Johnny-jump-up felt a peculiar thrill as those small eyes stared steadily at him. They had such a strange, fishy look in their depths, peering out from double rolls of fat.

By his side stood Turk Elder, a giant in height and weight, with a round bullet-head so small as to look ridiculous at first glance. The ex-pugilist had been well treated by fortune since his meeting with Sol Scott in the secret chamber of the Owls. His honest bluntness then in the face of utter defeat had attracted the notice of the Masked Miner, and afterward, in those troubled days at Red Rock, when Judge Bruno and his particular henchman, Equinox Tom, came to grief, in part owing to the courage and might of the once prize-fighter, this feeling was turned to real liking and respect. Sol Scott set Turk Elder up in business of his own, but as the days passed on Turk showed peculiar qualities as a detective, and he was transferred to the Agency at Denver. Then, when the fight began against Aces-and and his extensive gang of evil-doers, Turk Elder was sent out to aid in ridding the community of the scourge in answer to a request signed by Sol Scott and Dan Brown of Denver.

Johnny-jump-up concealed his secret uneasiness admirably, though it was redoubled as he saw all save the Royal Flush had disappeared from the scene while he slept. He felt that the cards were running contrary, and that he would need all his nerve to carry him safely through the game.

"Or of a johnny-jump-up growing with on'y one root, an' that one turned the wrong eend up-wards," laughingly retorted Enoch Dodge. "It's the durndest place fer nat'ral queeriosities, this kentry!"

Johnny-jump-up turned away from the gaunt speaker with a shrug of his shoulders, addressing Dan Brown of Denver:

"Have you taken time enough to weigh the little matter I spoke of, Mr. Brown? If so, I am ready to receive your answer, and carry it to my principal," he said, with a trace of impatience in his tones.

"You refuse to make any change? You will not offer us any more reasonable terms?" slowly uttered the detective.

"For the last time, no!" cried the desperado, his blue eyes glowing as his right hand crept almost imperceptibly toward a revolver butt. "You are foolish to ask any such question. If you are only seeking to gain time—if you have sent off your men in hopes of waylaying me or of tracking me to the spot where Aces-and is waiting my return, his knife at the throats of your children—you are making a bad matter worse. Come! I want my answer!"

"An' hyar you've got it, honey!" grated Enoch Dodge as he suddenly grasped the little desperado from behind, one strong hand confining each arm, a bony knee pressing heavily into the small of his back. "I reckon it comes quick enough to suit your hurry, don't it?"

"Curse you all! This will be the death of—" A dexterous twist hurled him flat on his face to the ground.

CHAPTER XIII.

A COLD DEAL FOR JOHNNY-JUMP-UP.

EVEN as he fell heavily, the little desperado contrived to snatch a knife from its scabbard, but before he could use the blade, hampered as he was, Nor' West Nick was at his side and wrestling the ugly weapon from his grasp. And then a touch of the keen edge severed in twain the belt which encircled Johnny-jump-up's waist, and with this in his hand the fat detective fell back to the side of his mates, grinning in thorough appreciation of the scene.

"Let up, you coward!" panted the desperado, struggling with all the frenzy of a madman. "Jump a man from behind! I'll be the death of you for this—Satan grill you alive!"

"When you 'sociate with curs an' cowards an' sich like, do as they do," equably retorted Enoch Dodge, watching his chance and suddenly twisting both hands of his antagonist behind his back, when a sharp click told his mates the job was done. "Meet 'em at thar own tricks, an' that's jes' what I'm doin' now, Johnny-with-the-pansy-psy!"

Enoch rose erect and stepped back a pace, permitting the handcuffed desperado to scramble to his footing as best he could.

It was an almost hideous face that Johnny-jump-up turned toward Dan Brown and Sol Scott as he regained his feet, so full of ferocious hatred was it—the face of a fiend rather than that of a man. And his voice was harsh and rasping as he spoke:

"Is this according to your orders, dogs? Did you order him to assail me after this cowardly fashion? Did he even have your consent to bounce me like this? Speak, you dirty whelps!"

His savage rage got the better of him, and he broke off in a torrent of oaths and curses that seemed enough to blister his tongue, only ceasing for lack of breath. And then Dan Brown, who had quietly listened to his raving, made reply:

"Enoch Dodge is one of us, and whatever one does, all are responsible for."

Johnny-jump-up knew now that his game was lost. Those cold, measured tones would have proven that without any more convincing

evidence. He knew, too, that his life was in deadly peril, if not utterly forfeited, and deep down in his heart he cursed himself for having dallied so long, for having thrown away his great advantages. And then once more his scorching rage and intense hatred swept away the last vestige of prudence, and he snarled viciously, his blue eyes all ablaze:

"You'll sup sorrow for this, Dan Brown! You'll weep tears of blood for your share in this vile outrage, Sol Scott! Think of your wives and your children when Aces-and learns how his messenger is treated! Think of those dainty women turned over to the gang—"

Enoch Dodge cut his frenzied outburst short, after a characteristic and unique fashion.

"Johnny, Johnny, my son, won't you never l'arn perlieness a-tall?" he muttered, reproachfully, as his sinewy hands close on the shoulders of the diminutive desperado and with a dexterous twist brought him off his feet and across his deftly protruded knee.

And then, squatting there before the remainder of the Royal Flush, Enoch Dodge held Johnny-jump-up helpless with one sinewy hand while the other played the traditional role of a maternal slipper until the surrounding atmosphere seemed full of exploding firecrackers.

"Ef your conscience tell ye it ain't putt on thick enough, Johnny," mildly uttered the gaunt detective as he released his victim and rose erect, beaming genially down on the crouching desperado, "all you got to do is to make a sign, an' I'll double the half-solin'. 'Tain't no manner o' trouble. Fact is, I ruther like the doin' of it!"

Johnny-jump-up rose, gazing fairly into the face of the grim humorist with eyes that glowed like living coals of fire. His face was as white as death, his blanched lips quivering with deadly hatred. But in nothing else did he betray agitation. His voice was cold and even as he spoke:

"I won't forget this, Enoch Dodge. If I have no other points of an honest man, I always pay my debts. I'll pay *you* off, sooner or later. And may the devil lend you strength and life sufficient to carry you to the end of that payment!"

"Lord love ye, little cuss," grinned the tall detective, blandly. "I count on seein' the gray ha'rs of my great gran' childern, an' I hain't even begun fer to look 'round a'ter a wife, yit! It won't be no trouble fer my len'th o' life; but it's *yours* that gits me—gits me *bad*! Fer you *do* look the most onhealthiest! Fact is, it wouldn't s'prise me one mite ef you was to go off the hooks any minnit!"

"Murder me—that's all that will save you!" savagely grated the spanked desperado; then turning to Dan Brown and Sol Scott, both of whom were gravely watching, waiting.

If either of them had doubts as to the prudence of the course taken by Enoch Dodge, neither suffered these doubts to appear in their faces. Having given place to him, they were not men to trust only half-way. He would have free swing.

"But even that won't save you nor yours, dogs!" added Johnny-jump-up, his eyes blazing, his face hard and deep-lined. "By this time word is speedin' to Aces-and of your treachery! Before you can do aught to prevent it, your wives and children will pay the penalty! Kill me, if you will. I'll go under feeling that my vengeance is assured!"

"You hain't got enough, I see, Johnny," and grim Enoch dropped a heavy hand upon the shoulder of his prisoner. "You will let your angry passions rise, when I've told ye time an' time ag'in that ye didn't ort to do it! It's pesky queerious how hard it is to l'arn some boys which is which an' which is t'other! They won't take it in at the top eend, which one'd think was the easiest, nur you can't hammer it in at t'other. But I'm willin' to try ag'in—I'm willin' to keep on a-tryin' ontel my han' gives out, an' then I'll rive a shake out of a tree, an' keep on a-tryin'. Fer o' sech is the kingdom o' pappyhood!"

Despite himself, Johnny-jump-up shrunk back and cowered beneath that sturdy grip. It was fear of bodily pain. He believed himself "gritty" enough to withstand all the torture his enemies could inflict on him. But the shameful humiliation was worse than any torture any Indian brave conceived.

Enoch Dodge felt him cringe and quiver beneath his hand, and a short, grim laugh parted his lips as he said:

"All right, Johnny, I 'cept your 'pology. Don't transgress no mo', an' you shain't take a lay-over for bottom repa'rs ag'in. Lord love ye, lad, I ain't crazy fer it! I don't w'ar gloves, an' water is too skurce in these parts to make it nice work. 'Deed I tell ye, now!"

With a desperate effort Johnny-jump-up composed himself sufficiently to turn to Dan Brown and address him calmly:

"You are the one most deeply interested in this affair, Mr. Brown, and to you I put the query: Do you sanction this outrage?"

"Do you mean your spanking?" coolly asked the Denver detective.

It was worse than a blow in the face from the hand of a pretty woman. Johnny-jump-up

turned pale as death, then flushed until it seemed as though the boiling blood must burst through the skin. From red to ashen, then he managed to speak:

"You know what I mean. I came here a messenger, a bearer of a flag of truce, so to speak. I gave you terms on which you might hope to regain possession of your captured families, you and Sol Scott. You begged for time in which to consider the conditions, and I granted it, believing you to be in earnest. As a proof of my entire confidence in your good faith, I lay down in the midst of your armed ruffians and fell asleep. I awakened—to what?"

His voice choked and he ceased abruptly. Even to complete his desperate arraignment, he could not allude more distinctly to the humiliating punishment he had received from the hands of the tall detective.

"To a knowledge that your vile schemes are known to us all," Dan Brown coolly uttered, his blue eyes glowing fiercely, but his face calm and composed, his voice low and even in its tones. "You pitiful rascal! Did you for a moment think that we couldn't see through your trick? Did you think we would come to your preposterous terms?"

"Then you doom your family to worse than death!"

"If so, you will never be the wiser! You will not be there to gloat over their sufferings!"

"It is as I suspected, then?" quietly asked the desperado, his wonted coolness and nerve returning to him as he looked the worst fairly in the face. "You mean to murder me?"

"It is no murder to cut off a mad dog in the midst of its last frantic rush. It is not murder to crush the head of a rattlesnake as it sounds its warning and draws back to strike. And you are even more dangerous than the worst of the two. Murder! and *you*?"

Dan Brown turned away with a short, hard laugh of bitter contempt.

Johnny-jump-up glared around him like a mad wolf turned to bay. Little comfort could he extract from those stern, pitiless faces.

From them his gaze roved swiftly beyond, to be arrested by a figure near the corral, creeping slowly, painfully toward the lone tree. A figure which he recognized at a glance and the sight of which rendered his face still whiter, his eyes still more desperate.

It was Top Dancer, dragging himself nearer to the spot where the demon who had so ruthlessly shot him down without warning while in the performance of his sworn duty, was about to meet the penalty due his manifold crimes.

Dan Brown also discovered the wounded cowboy at the same moment, and his low ejaculation directed the attention of Sol Scott toward Top Dancer. The detective started forward, muttering:

"I swore he should see it when the time came—should take a part in the punishment!"

At a sign from Dan Brown, Turk Elder and Nor'west Nick followed after Sol Scott, to aid in carrying the sorely wounded cowboy. Turning once more to Johnny-jump-up, Dan Brown said:

"If you have anything further of importance to offer, John Sand, address yourself to my friend, Enoch Dodge. I have turned you over to him, to deal with as he sees fit and proper."

"An' ef you go to cuttin' up too rusty, little shaver, I'll turn you over jes' as I did a bit ago, to show you the big difference they is atween a man an' a runty scoundrel from Rapsallionville!" placidly supplemented the shining light of Grenada.

A hard, reckless laugh grated through the clinched teeth of the handcuffed villain. Knowing how helpless he was in the hands of these strong men, he had nerved himself to bear all they might see fit to put upon him, and thus cheat them out of the dearest portion of their revenge.

"Do your worst, devils! I'll show you that it don't take a mountain to make a man! You can hang or butcher, but that is all. Even in death I'll show myself your better!"

"I want to know!" drawled Enoch, with arched eyebrows. "Waal, now, sonny, ef you was free to bet, an' ef I wasn't a 'spectable pillar o' the church, I'd go ye a cookie that you're lying right from the word go! That you'll squeal wuss then two pigs onder a gate afore I've bin argyin' with you a week. An' afore the month goes by— Good Lawd! whar's the use in talkin'? A 'zorter under the 'fluence o' the power, couldn't git within telegraph range o' you—no, sir!"

"Don't forgit one thing—those women and their children will have to pay for all this, Dan Brown!"

A heavy hand fell on his shoulder and whirled him around to face Enoch Dodge once more. The ex-mayor of Grenada spoke sharply:

"Keep to the text as the boss lined it out fer ye, Johnny! He said I was fust mate on this flat-boat, an' you hain't no right to jaw back at the cap'n fer what I give ye. Sabe, John?"

"They'll suffer for it!" snarled the desperado, a wild and hunted light leaping into his eyes as he found his last hope deserting him.

"Keep a-chawin' on that, ef you like the taste o' the juice, Johnny-with-the-pretty-posy," grinned Dan Brown's representative. "We

won't take the trouble to choke ye off. Ye know it's the rule fer to give a man all he axes fer when the gallows is sot up an' the noose is all ready an' waitin' fer his thrapple to fill it out snug an' tight. You play you was that man, Johnny, an' take all the comfort ye kin, while ye kin—fer yer sands o' life is runnin' mighty short!"

"Get it over with, curse you!" snarled the desperado.

"Ef you're in sech a mighty rush, mebbe it won't come to an eend quite so soon," placidly retorted Enoch. "Thar comes the second boss, an' from the lovin' looks that pore critter he totes is castin' at ye, I shouldn't wonder a mite ef he was kerryin' a reprieve, or somethin' to that effec'—no, I shouldn't, now!"

A short, husky laugh broke from the pallid lips of Top Dancer as his bearers paused before Johnny-jump-up.

"I knew it, you cur!" he gasped, seeming to gain renewed life and strength as he beheld his assassin helpless in the toils. "I still live, and *you—you are doomed*! I said I would live—to spit on your vile corpse! I'll keep my oath, now!"

It was bitter as death itself for Johnny-jump-up to stand helpless and listen to those words. They cut deeper than the ironical comments of Enoch Dodge, and in desperation he turned to him.

"You claim to have charge of this affair. What are you going to do? Spit it out."

"In a heap bigger hurry than you was when you held the whip-hand over these gents, ain't ye?" drawled Dodge. "Waal, I don't know as I blame ye much. It must be pritty rough fer to take sech a tumble from your high hoss—to come down to listenin' an' beggin' so soon after you filled the pulpit—it must so!"

Johnny-jump-up relapsed into a sullen silence.

"Makes a powerful sight o' difference whose bull it is that gits the hornin', don't it, Johnny?" grinned the master of ceremonies. "Time was when you jes' loved the sound o' human wind, an' couldn't draw the sarmon out fine enough. But then it was white men as suffered, you low-down whelp o' perdition!"

Hot and bitter came the concluding sentence, and as his just indignation overpowered him, Enoch Dodge caught the desperado in a mighty gripe that threatened a speedy vengeance. But Sol Scott caught his arm and uttered a warning murmur. Instantly the ex-mayor of Grenada relaxed his grasp and fell back, whipping both hands behind him, the better to resist temptation.

"Little more an' I'd 'a' done it, wouldn't I?" he muttered, with a half-abashed smile upon his honest countenance. "Thinkin' o' the way he kivered you all over with his dirty insults sort o' sot my blood to b'ilin' over; but it won't happen ag'in. It ain't fer the likes o' him to hop the twig so easy. No, sir! When he goes, it'll be with a blessin' on the hand that sends him on his down trip to the old boy!"

"And I must have a—hand in—it!" panted Top Dancer. "The boss promised—I might."

Johnny-jump-up knew now that he was doomed to death, if not worse, and his eyes glanced swiftly around during the brief interval in which Enoch Dodge was off his guard. He saw the horses standing near—so near that two mighty leaps would carry him to them. With his hands ironed and behind his back, it would be a delicate job, but—at least it was the ghost of a chance, and anything was better than to stand still and bear all these bitter taunts.

With a move like lightning, he leaped up and kicked Enoch Dodge in the middle, then leaped past him with a wild yell. Only to come in contact with one long arm as Turk Elder barred the way. And, lifted from his feet by the huge ex-pugilist, he was held kicking and writhing as he cursed and blasphemed, high in the air, utterly impotent.

"Shell I drap him, boss?" quietly asked Elder, the hard light in his eyes, the quivering of his mighty muscles telling how hard he meant that drop should be.

"No," quickly cried Dan Brown, leaping forward and tapping the huge arm. "He must squeal before he croaks!"

"All right, boss," placidly replied the giant as he lowered his captive to the ground, steadying him until he felt his feet again. "Ef you say squeal, squeal it's got to be, in course!"

"Not from my lips!" sullenly grated the baffled desperado. "You can kill, but you can't make me talk more than I choose of my own free will. Even in death I'll have my revenge!"

"That's your say-so, little high-kicker," growled Enoch Dodge, his face still showing signs of the vicious stroke he had received. "Wait ontel I've tried my powers o' persuasion, an' then see. I've handled more contrary critters then you dare be!"

Sol Scott stepped forward and with a sudden trip, threw Johnny-jump-up to the ground, kneeling on his body while he deftly knotted a stout thong about his ankles. Rising, he handed Top Dancer a revolver, saying gravely:

"We leave the rascal in your care for a few minutes, Top. If he manages to break his bonds, shoot him like a dog! But not unless you

see it is necessary to keep him from escaping. If he dies without revealing the rendezvous of his gang, it may be fatal to your mistress and her child. You understand?"

The wounded cowboy nodded as he clutched the weapon.

Enoch Dodge noted the wild, deadly light that filled his sunken eyes, and frowned a little as he muttered in a low tone:

"You kin trust him, Scott? Looks to me as ef he mought fergit all but the shootin' part!"

"I can trust him," was the calm response. "And now, suppose we take a little walk? It won't do any harm to discuss matters a bit before going any further with this rascal."

He did not wait for any response, but led the way to one side, from where it would be impossible for the prisoner to overhear their words.

"You know how much is depending on this, friends," he added, his tones hard and forced, his eyes alone showing how terribly his heart and brain were affected by the peril of his loved ones. "You know that a single false move may be fatal to those who are dearer by far than all the world to us—to Brown and myself."

"With the rest throwed in, pard," muttered Dodge, his bright eyes suddenly dimming. "Not so close an' precious to us, in course, as to you two, but nigh enough to make our hearts ache when we think of 'em in the grip o' hellhounds like them! Say to all of us, pard!"

"So dear to all of us, then," amended Sol Scott, something rising in his throat and making his words sound indistinct. "Think of them, and cast all other thoughts aside. When you have done this, stop and tell me if we are acting all for the best."

"Bearing in mind that money is of no account save as a possible means of ransoming our precious ones," added Dan Brown.

"I'll tell you what I think, an' ef it would make my pinion weigh any heavier, I'd be willin' to bet my head to the clusness of my shot," deliberately spoke Enoch Dodge. "Aces-and wants your money bad enough, or he wouldn't 'a' pitched into no sech desprit game as this. He wants revinge, too, heap bad. Ef he kin git both, won't he take 'em?"

There was no response. Dan Brown and Sol Scott knew what the tall pard was driving at, and it coincided with their own fears, only too closely.

"Sart'in he would, an' thet's jes' what he's bin figgerin' on," was the confident addition. "Ef they ain't wuss back o' that, then I'm a lunk-head. Ef he ain't countin' on playin' both eends ag'in' the middle, I never looked over the board!"

"You think, then?" hesitated Dan Brown.

"I think this. Aces-and sent Johnny-jump-up hyar to buldoze you. He wouldn't even pretend that you was to git back the pris'ners at the same time you paid over the gold. He was to hold on to them ontel he got the gold safe out o' yer reach, an' put ground atween you an' him to make sure of a mighty long chase afore you could ketch up. For why did he hold out fer all this? To git double squar' with you two men, the ones as broke up his payin' business in these parts. To take a black an' bitter revenge onto you, through your famblys!"

"As heaven is my jedge, gents! I b'lieve the dirty cut-throat means to strip you clean, an' then butcher your folks on top of it!"

"It does look like it, I must confess!" muttered Nor' West Nick.

"A double cross, or I never smelt one!" added Turk Elder, in his hot indignation falling back on the slang of the "squared circle."

"I'm afraid you are right, old friend," gloomily uttered Brown.

"If so, how can we hinder him?" asked Sol Scott, calmly, but with the terrible calmness that is so close akin to utter despair. "If his messenger fails to return on time, he can and will carry out his horrible purpose!"

"Not ef we get thar afore the time runs out," quietly uttered the gaunt member of the Royal Flush.

"Aces-and is no fool, whatever else he is. He will guard against all chance of surprise. He will set out pickets to watch for any one not of the gang, and before we could close in, he would—"

Strong man though he was, Sol Scott could not pronounce those terrible words. No need. All within the sound of his voice understood his meaning.

"Ef we was to go blindly 'long huntin' fer somethin' which we could on'y guess at, I grant you," coolly retorted Enoch. "But ef we went to work as we would with somebody else's dear ones in trouble, how would it look then? Not nigh so hopeless, I'll go bail!"

"You count on wringing the truth from the lips of Johnny-jump-up, then?" suggested Nor'-west Nick.

"Jest that," and Enoch Dodge nodded vigorously.

Both Sol Scott and Dan Brown shook their heads despondingly.

"You don't know the rascal as well as we do, or you'd never count on that, old friend. He's a devil incarnate, but he's true grit. You might tear him limb from limb and he would

die cursing you, but he wouldn't utter a syllable to be of service to you."

"I'm afraid we have thrown away our only hope," gloomily added Sol Scott, his head drooping upon his bosom. "Aces-and might have played fair—he might have kept faith with us!"

Enoch Dodge gently took him by the hand, his tones gentle and almost fatherly as he spoke:

"I don't wonder you feel that-a-way, pardner. No doubt I'd think jes' the same ef it was me in your shoes. But I don't stan' thar, wuss luck fer Aces-and and better luck fer your dear folks! Though I love 'em like they was my own flesh an' blood, I kin look at the pickle with cooler narves an' stidder eyes then either o' you kin. Whar you kin on'y see them in danger, I kin take in the surroundin's as well. An' doin' this, I tell you that ef you hed paid down the gold that vile hell-hound axed, you'd bin so much out an' your folks still funder from you an' a heap nigher thar death!"

"Aces-and ain't goin' to be in a hurry to do any killin'. He wants gold, an' he wants it bad! He'll grow oneasy ef Johnny-jump-up don't come home on time, an' he'll keep a still clusser lookout fer snags, but while he sees the ghost of a chance o' gittin' the gold fu'st, he won't do no wuss. This much I'd be willin' to take my oath on."

"Now thar's Johnny-jump-up. He knows jes' whar the gang holds out while waitin' fer him. He kin tell all we want to know, an' tell it he shell, ef you two on'y putt the doin' in my han's an' let me work the thing jes' as I see fit."

"I wouldn't ax it ef you was plum' your own selves, mates, but you ain't. You're too turribly interested fer that. You cain't think or reason clean. I kin. I will make him squeal, ef you give me the right."

Dan Brown impulsively caught his hand and cried:

"I'll trust you, old friend! Do as you think best, and may a merciful God lead you to perfect success!"

"And I will give way, too," muttered Sol Scott, but in less hopeful tones. "If you fail—well, there remains revenge!"

"But I ain't goin' to fail," laughed Dodge, cheerily.

CHAPTER XIV.

ENOCH FREEZES JOHNNY-JUMP-UP OUT.

"Ef he was ten times grittier than a grin'-stone I could fetch him to Limerick, an' that without drawin' a drop o' blood from his runty carcass," added Enoch Dodge, a grim smile increasing the wrinkles on his honest countenance. "All I ax is full swing at the p'izen critter, an' men to kerry out my orders jes' as I give 'em, without stoppin' to argy why this is which an' why it ain't t'other."

"We leave everything to you, old friend, and may you be as successful as you hope," muttered Dan Brown, despite the confidence of his tall pard feeling a heavy sinking at his heart.

The die was cast now, and they must abide the consequences, be they for good or evil. And oh! the chances seemed so terribly against them.

"I never lied to ye yit, mate, and I'm too old a dog fer to take up with new tricks at this time o' day," gravely uttered Enoch, the wistful light deepening in his honest eyes, so eager was he to lend comfort to his partners. "I give my word that afore I git through with Johnny-jump-up he'll tell everythin' you want to hear. He'll beat a trained dog fer answerin', I tell ye!"

"The sooner he's put to the test the better then," interposed Sol Scott, in a cold, metallic tone that told how great was the restraint he was placing on himself.

"I'm greeable to that, though I ain't one o' the breed that rushes things so fast they break 'em clean off afore the rest o' the machine kin git fairly started."

"Fu'st an' fo'most, we don't want too many eyes an' ears o' the human 'suation floatin' 'round our workshop. We three chickens, with you two gamecocks, is all they is room fer. Ef you'll jes' send the boys over to your ranch," nodding toward Sol Scott, "it'll be all hunk. Needn't tell 'em in so many words that we don't want 'em snoopin' 'round, but give 'em a bit o' work to do. Say to pick out a lot o' prime critters an' fit 'em fer hard ridin'. Most anythin' 'll do."

"If they stay in the pen where they are they can't see anything," ventured Dan Brown, a little dubiously.

"But they kin use thar years, cain't they? I know what you think, but I ain't so pesky sure of it—wish't I was!" retorted the tall member of the Royal Flush. "They's just a chainece that Johnny-jump-up let out a bit o' the truth when he swore that we couldn't make a crooked move 'thout the word makin' a quick trip to the hole whar Aces-and is hidin'. We'll play he was right, anyhow."

"And so make sure of its getting to Aces-and?"

Enoch Dodge laughed softly.

"They hain't none on 'em see'd or heard anything yit that would sot the river afire, nur yit blister the years o' Aces-and even. That's why I hed you shet 'em up fu'st-off. They won't know any better when you tell 'em to mosey fer the Scott ranch. An' ef they git sp'icious—by

which I mean them as Aces-and hes bought over to play the spy fer him, 'lowin' they is any sech in the outfit—that they's somethin' rotten in Denmark, how kin they make sure? An' ef they try to kerry what they don't know, won't some o' the honest part be mighty apt to smoke 'em slippin' off?"

If not thoroughly convinced, the two detectives were silenced by the arguments brought forward by the gaunt member of the Royal Flush, and immediately moved off toward the distant corral where shrewd Enoch had had the cowboys rounded up.

"Now, lads," and Dodge turned quickly to Nor' West Nick and Turk Elder, "we want to git down to our own doin's. Fu'st, them boys don't want to see how we've got Johnny-of-the-posy trussed up. I reckon we kin play the little game onto them, ef we try right smart."

"And be so busy discussing the affair of ransom-money with his lordship, that we have no time to bid them good-by," laughed the fat detective, with a shrewd wink of his little pig-eyes.

"You've hit it right in the bull's-eye, mate!" ejaculated Enoch Dodge, his eyes snapping with satisfaction. "It does a man good to see one o' the hand in his old fix. Those pore boys! Ef this was to last much longer, they'd go clean crazy 'long o' thar loved ones."

"They are all broken up, that's cert in, but it will come out right in the end," added Nor' West Nick as he moved after his partner toward the lone tree, where Top Dancer still held Johnny-jump-up under the muzzle of his revolver.

Enoch Dodge was rolling up a pocket-handkerchief as he strode along, and without a word of preface or explanation, he stooped, caught the little desperado by the throat, choking him viciously until his clinched jaws relaxed sufficiently to admit the rude gag.

"That's the quickest way to argue with ducks o' your feather," grimly muttered Dodge as he fastened the gag in place, then lifted the angry, dazed prisoner to a sitting posture, taking care that his back was turned toward the corral from which the cowboys might be expected to emerge at any moment. "Now, you want to set like you was tryin' to bu'st the machine of a pictur' artist wide open. Ef you don't—waal, mebber you'll wish ye hed!"

"You two do the talking act, and I'll cover these pretty ornaments with my fatness," chuckled Nor' West Nick, dropping to the ground in a position of careless attention, his mammoth body effectually hiding all but the head and shoulders of the prisoner. And with Enoch Dodge and Turk Elder sitting in front of the desperado, the gaunt member of the Royal Flush gesticulating with one bony forefinger, and Johnny-jump-up apparently listening as intently, it would have fooled keener eyes than even those of the cowboys who, as they left the corral and rode off toward the Sol Scott Ranch, cast curious glances toward the little group beneath the lone tree.

"Ef they's any hounds o' your pay in that outfit, Johnny-with-the-nosegay, I'm thinkin' they'll be mightily puzzled to do what you wish they mought—deed I be," chuckled Enoch Dodge as the cowboys vanished from sight behind the main corral. "They've pulled out. They've looked to you fer signs, an' you didn't give 'em none. They see you on your hunkers here, talk in' sweet as 'lasses to your uncle. They say things is swimmin' with the current, an' we ain't got nothin' to bother our fool' heads 'bout!"

What a savage glare there was in the eyes of the thoroughly defeated desperado as he was obliged to sit and listen to those mocking sentences! He was already reaping the just reward of his crimes.

Enoch Dodge leaped to his feet as he saw Dan Brown and Sol Scott returning, and hurriedly whispered a few words into the ear of Turk Elder. The ex-pugilist grinned until his good-natured countenance seemed fairly split in halves, then ducked his head and skurried off at a rare pace, his huge form shaking and quivering with suppressed glee.

Enoch Dodge pulled the gag from between the jaws of Johnny-jump-up as he rose again at the approach of the two detectives.

"So fur so good, mates!" he exclaimed, with a nod of satisfaction. "The field is cl'ar, an' they ain't nothin' left fer us to do but to teach this little runty cuss to chirp out the tune we want to hear the wu'st. I don't reckon that'll be much of a job."

"If you mean me, you gangling cur!" savagely snarled Johnny-jump-up, with a venomous glance upward, "you'll hear nothing sweeter than curses from me though you spend a year in the attempt."

"Waal, ef one year won't fetch you to time, mebber two year'll make some difference," chuckled Enoch, blandly. "Time ain't o' the least use to us, Johnny. We got dead loads of it, an' would jes' as soon spend a century or so a-slobberin' over you as a onrepentant, onregenerate, contrairy cuss as not. Wouldn't we, mates?"

Neither Sol Scott nor Brown ventured a reply. They more than ever doubted the wisdom of the course taken by their old friend. They

knew how gritty the little desperado was reputed to be, and they feared that not even Enoch Dodge could break him down.

"Silence gives consent, an' that settles the hash, Johnny," said the gaunt member of our Royal Flush, stooping and picking the prisoner up in his strong arms, casting him across one shoulder and striding away toward the corral with as much ease as though he handled nothing more substantial than a bag of bran. "You kin come, too, mates," calling back over his shoulder. "Mebbe you'll be such a heap o' fun, but the lookin' on won't cost ye nothin', an' mebbe you'll larn that some things kin be did jes' as well's others, ef not more so."

"Don't leave me, boss!" uttered Top Dancer, in a pleading tone. "I want to see him suffer, even if I can't have a finger in the pie."

Deeply anxious as he was, Sol Scott was amazed to find how much stronger the wounded cowboy seemed. His tones were clearer, his sentences unbroken, and there was a slight trace of color in his face.

Top Dancer smiled faintly as he read this wonder in the face of his employer, and he muttered:

"It's seeing that hound of the devil meeting with his just deserts, boss! When the old man gets through with him, I reckon I'll feel strong enough to take saddle and join in the fight for the mistress and the little queen—God bless 'em both!"

There was naught of cant or hypocrisy in this last sentence, and the hard lines in the faces of the brother detectives relaxed a little as they listened. Sol Scott glanced inquiringly into the face of his partner, and the Denver detective nodded assent.

"Why not? He loved them—he has suffered bitterly at the hands of that rascal. It is no more than right and just that he should be a witness of his punishment, let that be what it may."

Together they lifted the wounded cowboy on his blanket and slowly, carefully, gently carried him into the corral into which they saw Enoch Dodge enter with his captive.

This was a small pen, constructed of tight boards, reaching above the crown of a tall man when standing erect. Whatever transpired in there could only be seen by outsiders through the barred gate or by bodily scaling the fence itself.

Enoch Dodge lowered his captive to the ground, taking scant pains to bend his back either, then glanced around him with an approving nod and a satisfied smile.

"Couldn't 'a' bin better ef the one as laid it out hed our tamin' trick o' this day in his eye all the time! All it lacks is some ropes."

"You have only to ask for what you want, and if it is possible to procure it, you shall be satisfied," quietly uttered Dan Brown.

"Four good lassoes, an' them you'll find on our hosses, will fill the bill ontel the boys come back," placidly replied Enoch.

"You sent them away, then?"

"Turk I did, not Nick. When he didn't come in with you, I sort o' reckoned you sent him off on some arrand, like."

Dan Brown turned toward the gate, but it was only to see the mountain from Rocky Bar filling the aperture with his body, bearing over his shoulder the very ropes for which Enoch had expressed a wish.

"Thought you might want something of the sort," Nor' West Nick smiled, blandly, dropping the coils at the feet of the master of ceremonies, reserving one which he at once began to uncoil, testing the noose and then waddling to one corner of the corral and passing the loop over the top of a stout post, bringing back the free end with him.

"You've hit it, then?" grinned Enoch broadly.

"I've got an idea, but maybe it isn't the same one you run down."

But to all appearance it was, for when Dodge took a lariat and secured it at the opposite corner, Nor' West Nick was as busily fixing a third to one of the other angles. And when the fourth lasso was adjusted, the free ends lay in a pile in the center of the corral, close to the spot where Johnny-jump-up lay, desperately nerving himself to meet and endure the torments which he now felt sure were destined to become his portion.

Gritty he undeniably was, and gifted by nature with an unusual insensibility to pain when his feelings were strongly excited, but there was something in the cool, methodical manner in which the gaunt member of the Royal Flush set about his work that sent a curdling thrill through his veins. He felt that he would be called upon to endure some wild, strange torture, and he knew, too, that he would be shown scant mercy after the bloody deeds of which he had so foolishly boasted. And now, as he noted the grave, troubled light in the eyes of the brother detectives, he abandoned the sullen resolution he had adopted, and broke the silence:

"Better think it over well, you two men!" he muttered, savagely. "The score is heavy enough against you and yours as the game stands. You will be worse than fools to add to it by letting that mad devil carry out his threats."

"Not a threat, Johnny," lightly interposed Enoch Dodge, his honest countenance wearing a look of reproach. "Jes' argyment. Good advice. Fatherly counsel. Coaxin'. Not threats; that soun's too mighty rough!"

"Choke him off, will you?" snarled Johnny-jump-up, viciously.

"Chokin' may come, but that 'pends on you, Johnny, not on me. Now don't let your angry passions rise ag'in, or I'll hev to half-sole them trowsers o' yours once more, which wouldn't be 'greeable to nuther on us. Better squeal 'thout it, Johnny!"

"I'm talking to your betters, curse you!" viciously snarled the desperado, his eyes fairly on fire.

"That may be, little runt, but they ain't got any say-so into this game while I'm dealin', I want you to onderstan'. It's me you've got to beg of, an' the sooner you squeal the quicker your torments 'll be over an' a thing o' the past. Think o' that, Johnny!"

"What you give me *they* will have to repay," the prisoner retorted, with a sudden coolness as complete as it was remarkable. "For every insult you pour out upon my head, two will be visited upon theirs. If you carry it too far, nothing on earth or in heaven can save them from the vengeance of Aces-and and the gang!"

"That's old, runty scrub," grinned Enoch, wholly unmoved. "You've said it so often that it's losin' its vartues. Aces-and keers a heap sight more fer ducats then he does fer you. He won't be in a hurry to throw all chances o' git-tin' it over his shoulder. An' while he's waitin' in hopes, we'll be actin' on your directions an' rakin' him in fer keeps, Johnny!"

"When you get any information from me, let me know, won't you?" the desperado growled, showing his white teeth viciously.

"I reckon you'll know it 'thout any much tellin', Johnny," was the placid response, as Dodge bent over him and severed the bonds which confined his ankles.

"Now don't fool yourself with thinkin' I'm doin' all this to set you free, sonny, fer I ain't; not much! I don't want to spoil them fancy duds o' yours. The time may come, some o' these long-come-shortlies, when I'll hev a kid big enough to putt 'em on an' w'ar 'em out with more honor an' decency ef not quite as much agony as you used to sling on. Ef I should, they'd save buyin' a new suit."

A twist of his strong wrist brought Johnny-jump-up to his feet, and then a nod set Nor' West Nick to work with deft fingers removing his lower garments. Then a pair of handcuffs of large size were snapped about each ankle, leaving the connected links to dangle free for the time being.

At a sign from Dodge, Nor' West Nick caught these, and Johnny-jump-up lay flat on his shoulders, his feet uncomfortably elevated for a few moments while Enoch removed the bracelet from one of his wrists, the better to take off his upper garments without injury to them. This was done so deftly that almost before the little desperado divined their object, he lay stripped to the buff, as naked as when he came into the world!

Enoch worked swiftly, and in a few seconds the prisoner's wrists were ornamented in precisely the same manner as were his ankles, and the end of a rope passed through each connecting link, then drawn taut until he lay helpless at their mercy.

"That's the way the game opens out, mates," chuckled Enoch Dodge, with a grim laugh as he glanced toward his partners. "Now ef you'll jes' freeze onto one o' these ropes, an' pull like you was workin' fer wages, we'll git down to hard-pan all the sooner."

Without a word both Sol Scott and Dan Brown complied, pulling steadily each on a separate rope, imitating the actions of Enoch Dodge and Nor' West Nick. And in less than a minute Johnny-jump-up formed a magnificent "spread eagle" in the center of the little corral!

His legs and arms were extended at full length, supporting the weight of his body, which was elevated a little over three feet from the ground. Then Enoch Dodge securely knotted his rope a few feet above where it passed through the chain links, and personally superintended the tying of the others. This done he strode to the side of his victim, gazing blandly down into his pale, drawn features.

"It begins to tickle a'ready, don't it, Johnny?"

Only a volley of bitter curses and blasphemy answered him. The ugly, vicious temper of the desperado seemed intensified instead of showing signs of yielding, but Enoch only laughed softly.

"Don't think it, Johnny—not fer a minnit, fer you'll git mighty bad fooled ef ye do. This ain't any o' the coaxin'. It's only the gittin' ready. When Turk comes back—"

"On han', boss, an' both han's full, too!" came the deep tones of the ex-pugilist as he entered the corral, bearing a mass of long green weeds in his arms.

At a sign from Enoch Dodge he advanced to where Johnny-jump-up could see his burden, and a mocking laugh broke from more than one pair of lips as a plainly distinguishable

shiver ran over the strained frame of the desperado.

He began to divine what he was to suffer, and his torture had fairly begun!

Through all these preliminary movements, Top Dancer had been an intensely interested spectator. His bitter hatred has been but faintly shadowed forth thus far, mainly because bare words could so poorly paint it, but it is hardly too much to say that only the hope of revenge on Johnny-jump-up had kept life in his body this long.

And now, as he saw what it was Turk Elder bore, as he began to see what manner of torment lay before his hated enemy, he turned to Sol Scott with a savage longing written on his face and echoing in his voice.

"Let me do the work, boss! Think how the dirty whelp treated me! Think what I've suffered—not in body alone, though that has been enough to pay for a thousand lives—but in mind, for *their* dear sakes! Let me do it, and I'll feel part way even with the cur!"

Sol Scott glanced doubtfully toward Enoch, who coolly nodded.

"Ef he kin do it, why not? It don't matter whose han' deals out the kerds, long's we git the right ones in the end. An' I reckon they ain't much doubt o' that!"

In his eagerness to begin, Top Dancer seemed to forget his wound, for he tried to leap to his feet, only to stifle a groan as he fell back again, glancing wistfully toward Sol Scott.

"I'm strong enough for it, boss, if I had a little help to get in range. I won't break down—but if I do, it will be worth it! Double worth it to get even with that bloodhound of hell!"

With a sign to Nor' West Nick Enoch Dodge approached the wounded cowboy and together they bore him close to the outstretched figure of the outlaw. Placing him on the ground in a sitting posture, Enoch held him thus while Nor' West Nick hastened out of the corral for a saddle with which to brace up the wounded man. And then, grasping a long stem of the nettles which Turk Elder placed beside him, Top Dancer looked eagerly for the word to commence the torture.

"Johnny," said Enoch, in mild but unshaken tones, standing where he could look down into the bloodshot eyes of his helpless prisoner, "I don't want to tortur' ye any more then you make me do it. You've got to squeal, an' the quicker you make up your mind to that, the sooner your torments 'll be over. Fer the last time afore the band begins to play, will you tell us whar we kin find Aces-and?"

No reply, nothing save a tightening of the muscles around his mouth, a setting of the jaws, a deadly glittering in the eyes.

Enoch Dodge moved a little to one side, but still from whence he could look into those eyes, then moved his hand. With a muffled growl of joy, Top Dancer brought up his arm and swept the bunch of nettles in a wavering motion along the body of his hated foe. Once, twice he repeated the movement, then paused to witness the effect.

He frowned blackly as he felt that so far he had failed, for not a muscle of the extended figure trembled, not a groan came from the tightly compressed lips.

Enoch Dodge smiled grimly as he noted this, and he muttered:

"Time enough, Dancer, time a-plenty yit; never you borry trouble. They ain't in any great rush to git in that pritty work, but they'll git thar in time. Jest at fu'st Johnny-with-the-posy feels like you was on'y keepin' the flies an' 'skeeters off'm him, but—didn't I tell you so?" as he abruptly broke off as he noted a slight shiver creep over the desperado's body where the nettles had rubbed him, more like a crawling of the skin than an actual motion of pain.

"It's gittin' in its work now, but you needn't break off fer good, old man! Jes' keep up a easy motion, an' don't insult ary inch o' his hide by lettin' it alone. It's fool's play, looks like, but mebbe it'll do the work that uglier measures couldn't begin to tetch. Mighty heap o' 'suadin' in them weeds! Soaks in, as it were, little by little, an' the longer a critter waits the wuss they penetrate. Lord! don't I know? Ain't I bin thar? Wasn't I raised right in a nettle swamp?"

Briskly Top Dancer did his work, brushing the prisoner from head to foot, now with slow and lingering motion, again with a swiftness that seemed to double the horrible itching which was assailing the helpless wretch—helpless in a double sense, since he was prevented even from twisting and writhing by the tautly drawn rope and the weight of his body, sustained by his extremities.

Now a light sweep across the face. Now on the tensely-drawn skin which covered arms and legs, already beginning to turn red and show signs of swelling. Here, there, now soft as the fall of a feather, but driving more poisonous barbs into the tortured flesh, then swift and savage as the pent-up hatred momentarily broke through the barriers.

To one not deeply interested in the outcome, the exhibition would have been frightful in the extreme, and all the more so from the marvelous nerve displayed by the victim. Not a sound was suffered to escape his livid lips. Not a look

of pleading or sign of yielding in those blood-shot eyes, though they seemed on the point of starting from their sockets as the horrible torture grew older.

Enoch Dodge was no longer smiling. His face wore a gray, deadly look, his eyes were riveted on those of Johnny-jump-up. His jaws were tightly clinched and his hands closed until the tough skin almost opened across the knuckles.

He had risked all on this device. If it should fail in producing the desired effect? If the grit of the little desperado should, after all, prove all he had boasted? If he should sink and still refuse to utter the words that might carry life and liberty to those dear ones?

The same doubts and fears haunted Brown and Scott as they stood a little apart, awaiting the result. Though purely mental, yet their torture was almost as intense as that undergone by Johnny-jump-up.

At a sign from Enoch Dodge, Top Dancer ceased his work.

"Once more, Johnny, I ax you to squeal. Ef you won't, then we'll git down to solid work, 'thout any more foolin' round the edges!"

Not a word, not a motion; only that savage glare in the bloodshot eyes. And Enoch Dodge said no more, for he knew that that wild spirit was not yet shaken, much less broken!

So he thought, as he motioned for Top Dancer to resume. But as the nettles touched that swollen body again, a hoarse, horrible screech came from the lips of Johnny-jump-up, and his eyes closed in as death!

Dan Brown leaped forward and took one look, then gasped faintly:

"He's dead! Dead, and taken the secret with him! God pity them!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE GAMBLER'S LAST BLUFF.

"DEAD be blamed, an' yit he ain't!" cried Enoch Dodge in a voice that formed a startling contrast to that of the Denver detective. The p'izen critter is jist comin' back to life an' his sober senses ag'in, I tell ye!"

Unceremoniously he pushed Dan Brown to one side and stared fixedly into that livid, blotched countenance, as though seeking confirmation of his impetuous speech. But it was not for that reason. To do him simple justice, Enoch Dodge had never seriously doubted the efficacy of his plan, though, for a single second when Johnny-jump-up yielded with that frightful groan, his blood chilled and his heart seemed to cease its work.

A single glance showed him that Johnny-jump-up was still living, though he had lost his consciousness under the terrible strain and still more terrible torments. And as a low, gratified laugh parted his thin lips, Enoch Dodge began untying one of the tightly-drawn ropes, a significant nod setting Nick and Turk at work upon the others.

"Tain't dead, pards," chuckled the grim master of ceremonies, with a self-conscious glance toward the pale-faced detectives. "It's a case o' too much silence. Ef the critter hedn't bin so durned contrary, he could 'a' held out longer. But he wouldn't nyther squeal in the tune we axed, nur yit in his own way. He bottled up his cusses an' blackguardin' ontel he was chuck full to the nozzle, an' when the pressure still kep' packin' it in tighter, somethin' hed to give way."

Dan Brown and Sol Scott interchanged glances of wondering doubt and renewing hope, mingled together. They had perfect confidence in the keen wit and cool judgment of their old friend, as a general thing, but with so much at stake, they could not be so sanguine. The secret they were running so much risk to learn was still locked in behind the blood-tinged teeth of the little desperado. If not dead, would he ever speak? Would he give them the key by means of which they might even yet save their loved ones? Or would he pass down to the grave hugging his revenge tight to his tortured bosom?

Enoch Dodge lowered Johnny-jump-up to the ground, though the ropes still remained within the irons, ready to repeat the spread-eagling at a second's warning.

"It's mainly fer show, though," grimly chuckled the old detective. "I reckon the p'izen critter hes got all he kin chaw, this fu'st trip. I wouldn't be afraid to bet a cookie onto it, anyhow."

"If not, there's still virtue left in these glorious darlings!" uttered Top Dancer, in his ecstasy of delight actually touching his lips to the bunch of nettles which he still held. "I've cursed them up hill and down more than once in the past, but I'll never see another without blessing it clear down to the bottom of my heart!"

"He won't want any more, Dancer," was the calmer reply, as the veteran keenly watched his victim. "He held on ontel natur' was clean done up an' he couldn't hold in any longer. The poor idjit never once think how the stings an' smartin' an' burnin' an' hell-fire would grow wuss an' wuss with each minnit fer many a long hour to come! He never think o' all this, or mebbe he'd 'a' showed more sense!"

"Poor devil!" muttered Top Dancer with a

sickly smile. "If I could only be appointed his nurse! I think it would cure me all up if I could sit beside him and soothe his torments!"

"It depends on what he says when he comes back to itchy-land, old man," quietly observed Enoch Dodge. "Ef he sings the tune we want to hear most, you've hed all the fun you'll ever git out o' his hide while I'm runnin' things. Ef not—ef he's durn idjit enough fer to stick it out—waal, we'll see when the time comes."

He broke off abruptly, for he noted signs of returning consciousness in the naked desperado, and bent over him, eager to catch his first signs, to extort the longed-for confession before Johnny-jump-up had time to collect his shaken wits and old hatred.

But he had his pains for reward. As the frightfully-rolling eyeballs came to a pause and the light of returning reason filled them, resting upon the thin, wrinkled face bending over him, a torrent of fiercest curses and threats burst from the purple lips.

Enoch Dodge drew himself erect, but keeping his keen gray eyes fixed on those of the desperado. His face was hard set and resolute, and all traces of pity or regret had vanished with the first oath that came hissing through the teeth of the frantic prisoner.

Not a word or motion until Johnny-jump-up ceased for lack of breath and the necessity of clinching his jaws savagely to resist the excruciating torture of the nettles. Then Enoch Dodge spoke:

"Air you ready to sing the little song I axed of ye, Johnny?"

"I'll die a million deaths first, you cowardly hell-hound!" gasped the desperado, the moment his clinched jaws relaxed, his body quivering and writhing back and forth on the ground in the vain effort to deaden that infernal itching. "I'll die—but not until I've murdered you by inches for this devil's work!"

Paler than ever turned the faces of Dan Brown and Sol Scott, for to them it seemed that all was lost; but not a change came over the weather-beaten countenance of the gaunt member of the Royal Flush. One would have taken oath that he had looked for no other answer.

"That's all right, Johnny. I knowed you wouldn't be tuned up jes' to the top-notch, yit, but we hed to let go long enough to spit onto our han's fer a fresh spurt. Ketch holt, lads, an' spread the little runt out fer the final seasonin'. Stiddy, an' all together—so!"

Cheerfully Nor' West Nick and Turk Elder caught up the ropes assigned them. Silently Dan Brown took the other, though there was little of animation in his face or motions. Luckily his strength was not put severely to the test, for the instant Johnny-jump-up began to feel the strain on his members—as soon as the inflamed skin began to strain and to stretch, redoubling that intolerable itching—as soon as he realized that his enemies meant to renew the frightful ordeal, worse a thousandfold than that of fire—his shaken nerves gave way entirely, and with a choking shriek he begged for mercy!

A swift gesture from Enoch Dodge held his mates stationary, with the ropes drawing Johnny-jump-up just clear of the ground. Sharp and pitiless came his voice:

"That's the fu'st note in the song we want to hear, Johnny, but ef it's the on'y one you've l'arnt as yit, so much the wuss fer you! Back you go, fer a lifetime, ef it takes every nettle this side o' the moon!"

"Mercy!" hoarsely gasped the writhing wretch, his words barely articulate so intense was his agony, so swollen his lips and parched his tongue. "Spare me, devils! I'll confess all you ask!"

"They's a false note a'ready, Johnny," warningly uttered Enoch Dodge, his gray eyes glittering wickedly. "I don't reckon your 'ligion hes got more'n skin deep as yit. Reckon we'd better run ye up fer a hour or so—hadn't we?"

"I'll tell—I yield!"

Faint and husky the words, and fearing lest death was coming to rob them of the precious secret, Dan Brown lowered his end, with a commanding gesture that caused both Turk Elder and Nor' West Nick to follow his example.

"We'll take your word fer it, Johnny," said Dodge, making the best of the situation, casting off his rope and permitting the tortured wretch to drop at full length on the cool ground. "But ef you ain't letter perfect in your lesson, it won't take long fer to hyste ye up to monkey-heaven ag'in—no it won't, now!"

A moan of delicious relief came from the lips of the agonized desperado, as the cool earth touched his inflamed skin. For a moment the exquisite torture ceased, but Enoch Dodge knew that this could not last long, and he sharply motioned his mates to fall back.

They obeyed, even Dan Brown retreating until the gaunt member of the Royal Flush was left alone with his victim. "It's plain business now, Johnny," he said, squatting beside the prisoner, his keen gray eyes riveted on those of the other, for he knew that it would be hard to hold him to the point when those infernal pangs returned in full force. "You hain't airt your freedom as yit, nur ye won't git it ontel you've

made a clean breast of the hull game. Fu'st, whar is Aces-and hidin'?"

"Water! I can't talk!" gasped the wretch. Enoch Dodge frowned blackly, but held a canteen to the swollen lips, permitting Johnny-jump-up to drink as much as he chose.

"It tastes mighty good, don't it? But it works both ways, Johnny. Ef you cut up rusty, it'll lend you stren'th fer to stan' a hour or two more nettlin'. Which shell it be? Open 'fession, or some more music?"

"I'll tell—tell all you want to know," sulkily muttered the desperado, his body beginning to twist and writhe partially because he could not help it, but for the momentary relief it gave those parts of his body which came in contact with the ground.

"That sounds hearty, but you don't want to make any mistake, my fine feller," warningly replied Enoch. "We hain't got the time to lose in the fu'st place, an' still less patience to waste. Talk straight, or you'll git another nettle bath, sure!"

"What do you want to find out?" muttered Johnny-jump-up, stifling a groan of intense agony.

"You know. Whar is Aces-and hiding fer you to come back?"

"In the Devil's Hoof Range."

"Lots o' room fer the answer to kiver, ain't it, Johnny?"

Johnny-jump-up shivered anew. There was worse than threats in that cold, measured tone, and he knew that Dodge would not be trifled with. A brief spasm, then he added:

"You know where the Winans brothers had their big fight with the Apaches? Where they stood 'em off until—"

"I know what you mean," was the quick interposition, as a map of the wild region indicated flashed across the brain of the detective.

"You will find him there—curse you!"

The final words slipped out before Johnny-jump-up could check them, but Enoch Dodge laughed softly instead of growing hot. The viciousness of the curse satisfied him that thus far the prisoner had spoken the truth.

"Cusses is like chickens, they say, Johnny, an' the less you hev to do with them in this atmosphere, the longer you'll be like to live. So, thar is whar Aces-and waits fer his dainty little brother?"

"I said so. What more do you want?"

"A heap," was the cool response. "Fu'st, I want to know jes' what sort o' signals you critters hes agreed upon fer this game. Ef a outsider wanted to make Aces-and a call, what sort o' music must he sing?"

"There is no change. You know the old code."

A dark frown swept across the weather-beaten face of the veteran at this reply, but his tones were softer than ever as he spoke:

"Mebbe you wasn't payin' 'tention to what I said 'bout the nettles, Johnny. Mebbe you fer-got that you ain't free as yit. Mebbe you'd better scratch your brains up a little an' give a straighter answer then them last ones. Don't you think so, honey?"

"I've spoken the truth, curse you!" was the sullen response. "Why should we have made any changes? We never once dreamed of anything like this! And it wouldn't have happened ef I hadn't been a fool!"

"The Old Boy hes kinder gone back onto ye, ain't he?" softly laughed Dodge, rubbing his rough palms together in silent satisfaction. "He is blushin' fer shame at the mighty mistake he made, I do reckon! But this ain't business, Johnny, an' business is our motto jest now."

"You've told us whar to find Aces-and, an' of course you wouldn't lie, with the smell o' them nettles still into your nostrils, strong! you say the old signs an' passwords is left on-changed. Of course Aces-and will hev out men watchin' for snakes?"

"Of course. The game is too heavy for him to throw away a chance. He'll play the cards for all they're worth, and I hope he'll beat you yet, you bloodhounds!" savagely snarled the prisoner.

"Nur they ain't nuthin' more you kin tell us to help beat the gang out o' thar prey, is they?"

"I've told you all I can. Now keep your promise!"

"Reckon I will," and as he uttered the words, Enoch Dodge passed the rope through the chain again. "Lively, boys! Johnny-with-the-nose-gay is gittin' in a hurry fer another taste o' nettle soup!"

A savage yell broke from the lips of the rascal as he felt the ropes begin to draw, and he hoarsely screamed:

"Devils! you lied to me! You mean to—"

"Fetch the truth out o' your mouth ef it takes a year, Johnny," sharply interposed the veteran.

"I've told you all that I—"

"An' the hull on it a passel o' lies as black as the heart they come from, you treacherous cur!" thundered Dodge, his eyes fairly sending forth flames as he tugged at the rope again. "I told ye what would come of it. I give you frank warnin'. But you wouldn't hev it so. You tuck me fer a mole-eyed idjit who'd swaller all the guff you could pour out afore me. You thought to git off easy, an' yit hev your re-

vengeantous. But it won't work. I see through ye. I knowed you was lying from the word go!"

"I told you the plain truth!" gasped Johnny-jump-up, twisting and writhing, striving to tear himself free from that agonizing strain. "I told you true, but you meant a lie from the first! You've got all you want, and now you mean to murder me by inches! May the blackest curses of hell forever follow you!"

"That's all right, Johnny," was the cold response to this wild outburst. "Top, old man, ef you've got any more o' that soothin' ba'm, suppose you play a gentle chune onto the gent?"

"Won't I?" laughed the wounded cowboy, bringing a bunch of nettles into brisk play. "I'd like nothing better than to grow gray-headed at just such work! I'd like him to have a thousand lives, if I might have permission to sting them all away, one after the other!"

"Enough!" shrieked the wretch, shivering with unutterable horror and anguish as he felt that touch of fire on his swollen body. "Take it away! I'll confess!"

"Not another batch o' lies, but the truth, Johnny?" significantly asked the veteran. "Ef it's more falsifyin' it ain't hardly wuth while fer us to go to the trouble o' lowerin' you down jest to haul ye up ag'in. Is it straight an' white talk, Johnny?"

A feeble groan was the only answer, but evidently Enoch Dodge took the affirmative for granted, as he slackened on his own rope, motioning the other men to do the same. Once more Johnny-jump-up lay on the ground, and enjoyed a moment of comparative relief from the tortures of the damned.

"The sooner you git to chirpin' the quicker you'll hev a dose o' sweet ile onto them stings o' yours, Johnny," admonished Enoch Dodge. "You said the gang was *cached* at the hole whar the Winans boys stood off the 'Patchies, but you lied. Whar be they? This time fer keeps!"

"Two miles this side of there, at the cave. You know."

"Which is why I ketched you in the lie, Johnny," laughed the cunning veteran. "I knowed ef the gang tuck that route they would n't pass by a place whar they could hold thar own ag'in a rijiment to take a crowded den like the one you spoke of. Now fer the other 'rangements I spoke of, Johnny. Don't you make another mistake, or it'll go mighty hard with you, my pritty boy."

"If I tell you all, I am to be set free, to go where I will, only so I keep away from the gang?" huskily uttered the wretched desperado.

"You talk fu'st, an' then I'll sing," was the cold retort.

"You mean to kill me after all!" with a savage snarl. "Better be sure of revenge then. Why should I speak?"

"Beca'se you can't help yourself, Johnny," and Enoch grinned maliciously. "Beca'se nettles is cheap an' easy got by them as knows whar to look fer 'em. Beca'se I'm dealin' the keerds jest now, an' you got too much in the pot to even think o' drawin' out. It's freeze out, you know, Johnny. You named the game your own self, honey!"

"Give me your pledge and—"

"I'll give you the ropes an' the nettles, Johnny, but I won't make any other promises," was the cold response. "You've got to go it blind ef you ever hope to come out even. Business, Johnny!"

With a muttered curse the desperado accepted the situation.

"I told you the plain truth about the signs and passwords. We saw no necessity for altering them. We felt so sure that we had the deadwood on you while we held those women and their kids."

Enoch Dodge stood where he could obtain a fair view of the prisoner's face, and as he remained silent for so long after this answer, Johnny-jump-up opened his eyes and glanced up to see what was the cause. And as Enoch met those bloodshot orbs, he laughed hardly, bitterly, his own eyes glowing wickedly, his tones hard and vicious.

"You've got a gall bigger'n a bull, Johnny, or you wouldn't think to fool an old hand like me. You're keepin' somethin' back."

"I'm not! I've told you all you asked, and all that can in any way help you to rescue your friends," was the sullen response.

If Enoch Dodge was not satisfied with the truth of this assertion then he played his part admirably. A low laugh bubbled from his lips, and he uttered in a cheery tone of voice:

"That's all right, Johnny. I just wanted one squint into your two eyes, without puttin' you on your guard by axin' fer it."

"I've told you all I can, and now—I suppose you'll let that fiend of the devil torture me to death!"

"No, I won't, Johnny—not jest yit, anyhow," was the cool retort. "I'm done with you fer the present. We're goin' to git all ready fer a frindly call on Aces-and. Ef you've got any message for him, mebbe we kin find time to liver it fer ye."

"Tell him that I've pulled out for a healthier climate," was the brief response.

"Don't send him even the shadder of a lie, not by me, Johnny," was the grave response, as Enoch Dodge shook his head slowly.

A cold thrill swept over the desperado, and his heart sunk once more. He knew before another word was uttered that he had counted without his master.

"You promised me life and liberty, if I'd—"
"Another lie, Johnny. I never promised you nothin'. I jest told you to chirp true ef you didn't want to go to the infarnal regions on a bed o' nettles."

"Then it's murder you mean, after all!"

"I didn't say that, nyther. You're all right ef you gave us the true tip. But while we're findin' that out, you'll hev to wait in this section as patiently as you kin, Johnny. It hedn't ort to be so hard to do. You ain't sca'cely fit fer to travel as yit. It'll take a good week or more to smooth ye down so you'll fit in a saddle. The men we'll leave you in the keer of will look to all that. An' when we come back with the skelps o' Aces-and and his dirty gang, an' in our middle you ketch a glimp' o' the women 'an' children which you helped to run off, why it'll make your heart slop over with joy as you fleet that all this is part owin' to the talk you slung at us so straight!"

Johnny-jump-up closed his eyes and averted his head with a low, savage moan. He quivered from head to foot, and his hands clinched so fiercely that it seemed as though the skin must part over the puffed-up flesh.

Enoch Dodge stood beside him with folded arms, silently laughing, with an expression on his weather-beaten countenance that puzzled the brother detectives. They did not know what to think. Surely Johnny-jump-up would not attempt to deceive them after those repeated warnings. And yet—

"But ef it shouldn't be so, Johnny; ef anythin' should go wrong an' we find out you'd made even one little mistake; then up would go our smoke-signals, an' them in charge of you would play the nettles ontel your body swelled up an' bu'st wide open! Ontel you was—"

Johnny-jump-up uttered a groaning snarl, and turning his bloated face and bloodshot eyes toward his tormentor, gasped forth:

"Enough! I'll make a clean breast of it now! I'll tell you all!"

CHAPTER XVI.

"ACES-AND" SORTS HIS HAND.

It was not all lies that Johnny-jump-up gave Enoch Dodge. The gang of horse-thieves and rascals-at-large really made the best of their way to the broken section of country known as the "Devil's Hoof Range," and had their ride continued long enough, they would have brought up at the natural amphitheater in which the Winans brothers had years before the date of this story, immortalized themselves by "standing off" a force of Apache warriors thirty-fold their own strength.

But Aces-and was playing a desperate game the best he knew how, and keeping an eye open to all the chances, both for and against him. He fully expected to win in the end, but to lose was still a possibility. He meant to win if he could without firing a shot or striking a single blow with forged weapon. But if the worst should come to the worst: if the Royal Flush should run them down and try to win back their treasures by force of arms instead of through the medium of the gold he desired: better a little more risk while the battle remained undecided, for the chance of flight should the tide of war turn strongly against them. And in the amphitheater one could only fight to the end; for the defeated there was no flight unless permitted by the victors. And keeping all this in view, Aces-and ceased his night ride some little distance short of the point first named by Johnny-jump-up, and cut little time in waste while making his preparations for what must come.

"Like Johnny-jump-up, he had little fear that Dan Brown or Sol Scott would show much fight when those worthies came to fairly understand the situation; but he would be prepared for them at all points before relaxing his efforts.

"Ducats first and then revenge, if we can work the oracle; but revenge at all costs!" were the words he repeatedly muttered to himself during that night ride toward the Devil's Hoof Range.

When yet a little distance from the cave in which he had decided to wait for the return of Johnny-jump-up, Aces-and dismounted and leaving their horses behind to be cared for by the main body, he bade those in particular charge of the captives to follow him, leading the way along the steep path to the cave entrance.

With all the readiness of one who feels perfectly familiar with his surroundings, Aces-and pushed aside the vines and bushes which so snugly screened the entrance, only pausing to give a muttered word of caution to his followers:

"Don't let them break their precious necks, or knock their brains out on the rocks, lads!"

The entrance was low and dark. The outlaws silently forced the two women to bend their heads for a few moments as they passed on, and

then in obedience to a slight whistle, came to a halt until the splutter of a match and the growing light showed them Aces-and a few yards in front, igniting a candle. And then, as he added a second and third to the first taper, the light grew sufficient to give the captives a tolerably accurate idea of their present surroundings.

The cavern was of moderate size, with a roughly-vaulted roof, from which had dropped fragments of rock until the floor was thickly sprinkled with them, from the size of a barrel down to that of one's fist.

Besides the rude arrangements for lighting the main chamber, a few preparations had been made in anticipation of a more or less prolonged stay in the cavern. Wood was collected for cooking. Water was stored in a number of kegs. Provisions were stored in one corner, high up out of the way of any prowling animal.

Aces-and gave his captives scant time to look around them before leading them from the main chamber of the cavern into a narrow passage at the rear, which made several abrupt curves before terminating in a slight enlargement which might be called a cell or chamber, just as the fancy struck the beholder.

Aces-and stepped to one side for his prisoners to pass by him, which they did under the impulse lent by Johnny's Infant, who gave little Willie Brown a spiteful pinch before releasing him.

"Baby, go and see that the cattle are safely stowed away, except your own and two others. There's a short ride before you yet."

Without a word of demur or curiosity the giant turned on his heel and disappeared from view, leaving the two women and their little ones alone in the presence of their merciless captor.

For some little time Aces-and stood watching them by the light of the one candle which cast its flickering rays over the scene. His left arm crossed his breast, supporting his right elbow, his white teeth slowly gnawing away at his doubled forefinger.

There was a dull, reddish light in his black eyes, a mingling of savage hatred and venomous triumph in his face that sent the blood in chilling waves back to the wildly-throbbing hearts of the women. Not for their own safety, but in fear for their dear and helpless children.

Aces-and saw this shivering shrinking, and it seemed to amuse him. A low, mocking laugh parted his bearded lips.

"I'm glad to see you haven't forgotten the lesson I taught you at Single Pot Ranch, Mrs. Brown, since it will save a repetition now. Unless, indeed, your daintily-handsome friend there requires something of the same sort to bring her proud stomach down to the level of common people."

"She does not—she will give you no trouble," hurriedly muttered Rachel Brown, as May Scott shrunk back from the outlaw, hugging her child, now sleeping, more tightly to her bosom.

"So much the better for her and the kid," brutally retorted the chief of horse-thieves.

"And yet, I'm not so sure but what I'd better let the Infant give her a little lesson. She is the wife of Sol Scott. She has lived with him long enough to become corrupted with the same aristocratic ideas that led you into rebellion when I took up the dealing. A judicious pinching of the kid might make all the differ—"

"Harm my child and I'll kill you!" fiercely cried the little woman, with an intensity that fairly startled Aces-and. "Spare her, and I'll obey the best I can."

Aces-and laughed maliciously at this abrupt change. His keen eyes noted the warning pinch which anxious Rachel gave her friend, but for the present he was willing to pass that by.

"That's all right, my pretty little spitfire. I don't want to damage the goods I have for sale, more than I can possibly help; at least not before the bargain is sealed and signed and the money paid over in good gold. Of course, until that bargain is fairly complete, it is the main point to hold fast to the goods. Business is business, and politeness and chivalry has to take a back seat for that."

"Treat us with common decency, if not with respect, and we will give you as little trouble as possible," coldly retorted Rachel.

"Set us at liberty, and we will pay you whatever sum you may demand!" more impetuously added May Scott, her eyes glowing vividly, her fair face lighted up with a new-born hope.

Aces-and flung out one gloved hand with a contemptuous gesture, his tones full of the same sentiment, as he answered her:

"Do you take me for an idiot, little woman? If I were to loosen my grip on you before securing myself, little gold would I ever receive from Sol Scott, unless it came in the shape of a bullet run particularly for my carcass! No, no! I know a trick worth two of that."

"Your reward will depend largely on how we are treated while in your power, Asa Sand," coldly uttered Rachel Brown.

"In your mind, lady," laughed the chief of the kidnappers. "Your husband will never know how you were treated until he has paid

the price demanded. Then, let him secure a rebate, if he can!"

"He will! he will, though you flee to the very ends of the earth!" impulsively cried Rachel, her dark eyes all aglow, her proud spirit unable to longer remain in bonds while that sneering, mocking face was before her. "He will exact full pay for every insulting word and look—will repay you in kind for every moment of pain and torture you have inflicted on his loved ones! I swear it!"

"And perjure yourself while taking the oath," lightly retorted Aces-and, seemingly restored to good humor by the fact of having shaken the enforced composure of his proud captive. "When I'm through dealing with Dan Brown, he'll be content to let business drop for a while. His heart may be willing enough, but his constitution won't stand it!"

He paused, as though expecting another retort, but if so, he was to be disappointed. Rachel saw that she had made a dangerous slip, and her solicitude for her children placed a seal on her lips.

But Aces-and had sent away Johnny's Infant with the express purpose of having a thorough understanding, and spent little time in waiting for his captives to talk.

"I didn't go into this game with my eyes shut, ladies," he added, in a graver, steadier tone, his countenance partaking of the change as well. "I knew it meant death if I failed to play every card for its full worth, if I made a single slip. But I knew, too, that the stakes to be won were well worth the danger."

"You know how close run we were—that Dan Brown and Sol Scott, with their hired bloodhounds, had driven us into a corner from which they felt assured escape with life was impossible. It called for a cool and quick brain to see through the tangle, but I proved equal to the task, and how the game has changed, you begin to realize."

"It isn't won yet. I know that as well as you do. It may never be won by us; but if the worst should come, be sure of this: we will not be frozen out without first making sure of our revenge."

Quiet his voice and manner, but still with something in both that caused the mothers to draw closer together, to cling more tightly to their children as though dreading separation from them.

Aces-and laughed softly as he noted this, and there was a devilish joy in his eyes as he added:

"Takes a woman to jump at a conclusion! You've hit it, my dears!"

There was no reply, but the hunted, anxious look deepened in both fair faces. They suspected, but they dreaded to be convinced.

"Until I hatched up this game, I could never see the use of kids," coolly added the outlaw, showing his teeth in an ugly fashion. "Of course, I knew that lacking them, the supply of players would soon give out, but I failed to recognize why the kids couldn't come into the world full-grown Billies and Nannies, ready for business, and of some worth at the start. Now I see my mistake! Shall I tell you how?"

Still silence. Willie stared defiantly at the speaker, but his mother's hand kept him silent.

"But using the kids, I'll manage you with much less trouble. That is one point. Another is: through them I'll make sure of at least partial revenge on Dan Brown and Sol Scott, should they be cunning enough to throw dust into Johnny's eyes and sharp enough to get here before he can give us the warning of danger. I'll have two strings to my bow, and while the bloodhounds are trying to secure one, I'll cut the other in twain! Now, do you understand my meaning?"

Only too clearly! They clung to their children, desperate defiance flashing from their eyes and written upon their faces. Aces-and laughed again, and there was a diabolical cruelty in his tones as he said:

"You are determined not to understand my meaning, I see, so I'll speak still plainer. You two women will remain in this palatial chamber until the end is reached. The children will be taken to another residence, no matter just where, until—"

"Not with life—not unless you kill me first!" panted Rachel, drawing her loved ones still closer to her breast as she glared desperately at the ruffian.

Aces-and laughed mockingly as his quick ear caught the sound of hasty footsteps approaching, and he stepped a little aside to admit Johnny's Infant, whose ugly grin showed that he had caught that wild defiance. There was a wolfish glitter as he glanced toward Willie Brown, then turned to his master with a coaxing accent:

"Gi' me leave, boss, an' I'll fetch 'em to taw! Jes' say I kin, an' won't I make the kid blaaf finely?"

"Not yet, Baby," was the cool response, as Aces-and tapped the shoulder of the eager giant. "Kindness with women, is my motto."

"Tain't the woman, it's the kid!" growled the Infant, scowling with savage earnestness. "He shot you—he tried to kill the master!"

"I know which is the greatest crime in your eyes, Baby," laughed the chief, but without a

trace of jealousy. "I don't say you sha'n't get even for it, too; but not just now."

He turned toward the captives once more.

"I have said it is to be, ladies. You may kick, but that will only hurt your own pretty toes, without at all shaking my resolve."

"I know the game I am playing. I know that it is either make or break with me. I expect to win, of course; but I'm not fool enough to shut my eyes to the possibility of defeat. If I win—well, I only ask fate to grant me long enough life to run through with my winnings! If I lose—even in death I'll have revenge of the bloodhounds!"

"I am going to take the kids from you and place them under the wing of our honest Infant, here. You know how dearly he loves them, particularly the boy! And knowing this, you can rest comfortable in the assurance that they will be made as happy as lies in the power of one poor, weak mortal to bring about. And I—well, I'll rest easy in the knowledge that my orders will be carried out to the very letter!"

Not much in the words, perhaps, to cause fear and trembling; but the tone, the glow in those black eyes, the vicious smile—they filled the hearts of Rachel and May with a torture that was almost more than they could endure.

"Listen to me, Baby," and Aces-and turned to the giant, one finger tapping against the broad chest as though to emphasize each word. "You will take the kids from here to the spot I told you of. You will pick two good men to go with you. You will keep close lookout for snags, as well as an eye toward this point. If you see any signs of rescue—if you are attacked by the bloodhounds—you will make sure of the kids first, even before you think of guarding your own life. If you see the signal-lights going up from here, you will kill the kids without hesitation. You understand?"

Johnny's Infant nodded rapidly, his reddish eyes turning toward Willie Brown, his hand dropping to the hilt of his too ready knife.

"Don't make any mistake, Baby," sharply added Aces-and, forcing the giant to face him again and gazing keenly into his eyes. "Don't let yourself imagine an attack, and don't take the moon for a signal-light. If you should, so much the worse for you!"

"I'll remember, boss," was the quiet response. Aces-and drew a revolver and turned toward the women.

"You have heard my instructions, ladies. It only remains for you to quietly turn the children over to the Infant, who—"

"Never! you must kill us first!" panted Rachel Brown, clinging more tightly to her loved ones, while May Scott imitated her action.

"Not your death, but his, first!" laughed Aces-and, as his revolver exploded.

Rachel Brown gasped painfully as she felt Willie start just a trifle in her arms, and her poor brain reeled as she caught sight of a bloody mark on his cheek. But the noble little fellow quickly cried:

"It didn't hurt, mother! Don't cry!"

"I only marked his ear that time, as a starter," coldly uttered Aces-and as he recoiled his weapon. "Refuse to give him up, an' I'll come closer to the center with each successive shot. Make up your mind, my lady! I'm business, now! Shall I shoot again?"

It was a terribly bitter struggle, but Rachel Brown knew from what she had experienced that the outlaw would show them no mercy. She felt that he would still further mutilate her child were she to hold out, and though it seemed like tearing her heart out by the roots, she kissed him passionately, time and again, then pushed him from her, crying:

"Spare him, an' I'll be your slave! Harm him further, and I'll have your vile life in return! I swear it by high Heaven!"

"Take the kid, Baby, and wait for the rest," coldly uttered Aces-and, shifting his aim to the curly head of Cherry Brown. "One more love-offering, my dear madam, and then you can take your ease. Shall I mark her with the same totem?"

He had conquered. The poor mothers knew now how helpless they were against his brutal power, and pale, tearless, too utterly wretched even for tears, they kissed their wailing little ones and then tore away from them—no milder word will express the action.

Johnny's Infant caught the two little girls in one arm and dragging defiant Willie after him, left the rock cell.

Aces-and laughed mockingly as the two women fell into each other's arms, all untouched by their agony, none the less bitter from its being silent and dry.

"You have behaved nobly, my dears, and if you continue as well—"

He ceased abruptly as Rachel Brown turned upon him, her white face fairly convulsed with hate and loathing, her voice harsh and strained:

"Have you not tortured us enough? Go, you monster! you demon! Go! or women as we are, all your weapons won't save you from death!"

For once in his life Aces-and shrunk from a woman, afraid. He tried to hide it, but in vain. And then he turned away, leaving them.

May Scott broke down, and wailing, sobbing,

shed tears freely. Rachel could not weep, but she found a relief in whispering in the ears of her weaker friend in misery:

"Courage, dear! They will come! They will save our precious ones, and terribly avenge our wrongs. They have never yet failed—be sure they will not now, with so much at stake!"

CHAPTER XVII.

DRAWING A PAIR OF KNAVES.

"I SAY, you man-body with a doll-head on top!"

"Same to you, puncheon! What is it?" came the prompt reply, but in the same low, guarded tone of voice.

"I've been thinking—"

"An' come to look fer a head as kin stan' the pressure?"

"—which would be the quickest way; to pad that stunted knob on the top end of your carcass into a respectable size, or to swell it up large enough by thumping it with these mauls," and Nor' West Nick reflectively held up a pair of clinched fists that would have compared favorably with a couple of hams.

Turk Elder seemed on the point of making a jesting reply, when something in the glowing gaze of his fellow scout caused the blood to leap quickly through his veins, and he leaned further forward, his lips slightly parting, a faint hiss escaping them.

Instantly one broad palm was slipped over his mouth, and Nor' West Nick nodded his head until his enormous mustaches writhed and twisted like twin snakes crawling out of the same hole.

"Right, my lad," he muttered, with a silent laugh of triumph. "I've struck a lead, and if we take hold of the right end I reckon it'll pan out all we could wish. How does that stick in your craw?"

"It's them I'm thinkin' of the hardest," and Turk Elder inclined his bullet-head toward the point where they had left Dan Brown and Sol Scott under care of Enoch Dodge. "Them an' the wimmen an' childern. I don't keer fer the beat—though mebbe some little sheer o' luck went with it—"

"No luck at all, but pure skill and science, Turk," chuckled Nor' West Nick. "It was an even start and you got left. Why? Because you didn't have enough o' the *sabe* to compete with the great, original—"

Nor' West Nick broke off abruptly, all traces of jesting or banter vanishing like magic.

"Business, Turk. Quit your fooling now. I've got to make you into a first-class rascal. Pity the nut on top o' you wasn't a bit bigger."

"It's the best I've got. Mebbe it'll do as well as a bigger one. It won't do no hurt to make the try, anyhow," was the quiet reply.

Turk Elder was even yet puzzled to understand Nor' West Nick, much as they had been thrown together during the past three weeks. The detective from Rocky Bar was still an enigma to him, and past experience told him that the more he sought a solution the more completely the fat detective delighted in befogging his trail. And so, though so anxious to share in the discoveries which he felt assured Nor' West Nick had made since their separation to reconnoiter the vicinity of the cavern in which Johnny-jump-up at last swore his mates had sought refuge, the ex-pugilist would not venture even a question.

Nor' West Nick laughed softly, nodding his head approvingly.

"You'll do, mate. I won't keep you on nettles any longer. I've located cre of the gang on guard duty."

"We must take him, of course!"

Nor' West Nick nodded, but with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Of course; easy spoken, but not so easy done, Turk!"

"Show me the critter, an' ef he ain't bigger'n a mountain, I'll tote him to whar the boss is waitin'," quietly added the other, not in a tone of boasting, but rather like one making a simple statement of fact.

"Of course you would, but all the same, I wouldn't be in a hurry. I didn't stop to take a second squint at the critter. Maybe he's a personal stranger to both of us. Maybe he'd kick at such unceremonious proceedings. He might even get so hot as to set off a pistol or two, at our impudence in scraping acquaintance without a regular introduction. And you know what a row that might make, Turk, old fellow!"

"Let me git close enough to grip the varmint, an' he won't squawk a single time!" muttered the ex-pugilist, closing and unclosing his big hands, the muscles of his arms almost bursting the sleeves that covered them.

"That's the difficulty, Turk," was the sober reply. "The fellow betrayed himself by the abominable tobacco he smokes, but he's where a body can't get within gripping range in front, without first exposing himself, nor from behind, without the rascal first rises erect. And that is why I say I mean to turn you into a villain without paint. You've got to play Johnny's Infant for a few minutes."

Turk Elder nodded until it seemed as though the little bullet-head would be jerked off his broad shoulders, his eyes glowing like balls of

fire as he divined the plan formed by Nor' West Nick.

"You'll pretend you bring him news from the camp. Act like you were half-boiling over with excitement, but don't make too much noise. Of course there are other men on guard besides this one, and if we are smoked before we can get in our pretty work, it's good-by, John!"

"I'll do my part, never you fear," muttered Turk, coolly, smothering his excitement, and burying it from sight.

"You'll keep the hat slouched over your face, and don't let the real music of your voice ring out until the old man takes his turn at the bellows. You get the critter to rear up on his hind legs, and I'll drop him a line," tapping the lasso which was wound about his enormous middle (waist he had none). "When he gets it, you mount him from front, and clap a stopper on his jawing-tackle. I'll be there before long, and then we'll decide on the next move. You *sabe*, pard?"

"Show me the critter. P'int out the kiver you want to reach afore I make a break. Tell me what sign I'm to act on, an' then you git down to sober work without any funder thought o' me," quietly.

"Good boy!" and Nor' West Nick stood on tip-toes to pat the giant patronizingly on one shoulder. "We'll bring order out of chaos yet!"

Turning, the fat detective led the way silently back through the night, passing over the tangled and difficult ground with an ease and celerity truly amazing in one of his clumsy build. Turk Elder followed him in silence and with equal caution, until Nor' West Nick paused and nodded for him to creep up beside him.

A single motion sufficed to show Turk Elder the figure of a man stationed in a snug bit of cover composed of rocks and bushes. From the point which the two scouts now occupied, the fellow was tolerably well hidden; from almost any other he would have been entirely concealed, while possessing the power of scanning the ground in nearly all directions himself.

Silently Nor' West Nick pointed out the line he meant to follow, the side from which Turk Elder was to make his approach, then said:

"Give me five minutes in which to make my point, then out you go as Johnny's Infant. Tell what lies you please, and I'll be responsible for them when Judgment Day comes. Only—make the critter rear up on his hind legs!"

He did not wait for a reply, but crept silently away. Turk Elder imitated this action, but took a different course, in order to show himself opposite the cover selected by Nor' West Nick, as well as to give his appearance a more natural look; he would be more in a line with the cavern from which he must be supposed to come.

He gained his chosen position, then waited patiently for the sign agreed upon. It came in a very few moments. He caught sight of Nor' West Nick rising from cover, lasso coiled in one hand, the other making a motion for him to break cover. He obeyed without a thought of personal danger, striding swiftly toward the hidden sentinel, at the same time uttering a subdued whistle.

"Hold! right whar you be!" came a low, menacing voice, and Turk Elder stopped abruptly, flinging up his hands, keeping his face in the shadow, his own tones showing traces of agitation, husky and quick:

"You're wanted, mate! Hell's to pay at the cave! Boss nigh dead, an' both the wimmen but little better!"

That was enough. Startled, having no cause for suspecting him other than Johnny's Infant, the guard rose erect and stepped forward. Only the one step. A noose dropped over his head, and closed swiftly about his throat as Nor' West Nick jerked back. A stifled cry—then Turk Elder was kneeling upon a prostrate figure, his fingers clasped about a throat with such force that neither breath nor sound could pass through.

"Don't kill him, mate," grinned Nor' West Nick as he crept to the side of the captured outlaw. "We can make better use of him than that, if I'm not 'way out in my guess. He's got a mate over yonder, and to guard against accidents, we've got to take him in as well."

Turk Elder slowly relaxed his mighty grip, ready to renew it at the first sign of recovery on the part of the outlaw; but he had done his work well. If not dead, the fellow was utterly unconscious.

A look of anxiety came into the eyes of Nor' West Nick as he saw how limp and lifeless the outlaw lay, for he knew that much might depend on what this fellow could tell them. A brief examination, however, reassured him, and as he squatted there under cover, his fat fingers deftly fashioning a gag, he spoke to his partner:

"I smoked the other imp while making my cover, and while I waited for you to play your part, there was a hornet's stinger playing a jig at the root of each and every separate hair on my head! It seemed as though the villain must certainly hear us, and then, of course, he would be snooping around to find out what was in the wind. But he didn't—and now we've got to bring him to Limerick!"

"Won't it be too much risk?" slowly uttered Turk Elder.

"Not to take him in—yes," positively nodded Nor' West Nick.

"I didn't mean that. Mebbe the same trick wouldn't work as well over ag'in. One tongue kin tell all we want to find out. Show me whar the critter hangs out, an' leave him to me, while you take this 'ne to the boss."

"Nor' West Nick shook his head, though there was a light of hearty appreciation in his little pig-eyes as he reached over and clasped hands with his mate over the body of their captive.

"You'd take all the danger on your own shoulders, mate; but it won't do. You might rub him out without making any row, but that isn't just what I want at present. As you say, one tongue's plenty to squeal all we care about hearing; but will *this* tongue do it? Suppose he should turn sullen and refuse to squeal? Wouldn't it be handy to have an opposition music-box close at hand? And not only that, but I believe we can play both ends against the middle—to speak classically!"

Turk Elder looked wise as an owl, though, to tell the simple truth, he was little the wiser for the hurried explanation. Still, he was used to yielding to the keener wits of his partners in the Royal Flush, and this case was not to be an exception.

Nor' West Nick did not say more just then, for the captured outlaw gave signs of returning consciousness, and he deftly pressed the gag between his jaws before he could realize the meaning of the action, or indeed the fact that he had fallen into the power of the enemy.

"It's for the good o' your own health, honey," grinned the detective, checking the involuntary motion of the rascal's hand to his mouth. "The night air was giving you the toothache, when we came to your rescue. Just lay still a bit, and listen to my sermon, will you?"

Still low but more sharply came his tones, as the fellow began to writhe and struggle to arise. Turk Elder sat on his legs and held his arms motionless. Nor' West Nick peered into his face, holding his head so the rays of the moon would fall athwart them, chuckling softly as he noted a look of horrified recognition come into the captive's eyes.

"We was bound to come, since you were watching for us, my dear fellow. Not to bluff you too bad at the send-off, we come in sight little by jerks, but you can bet high the rest o' the Royal Flush are close at hand, ready and eager for the last hand in this precious game of freeze-out Aces-and-proposed. If all his cards are as weak as you have shown yourself, he won't get a smell."

"I know the critter," interjected Turk Elder. "It's Tim Warden. They's a rope bin noosed fer him this ten years past!"

"It won't have to wait much longer, then, unless—" and Nor' West Nick paused abruptly for a brief space, only to resume in a changed tone and manner: "Unless he shows himself worthy a reprieve. Tim, are you hungry for a bite of the rope?"

A sullen growl was the only answer.

"You are? Well, then you shall have it before the moon goes down!"

Low as were these words, the tone in which they were uttered sent a cold chill quivering through the veins of the captive, and as though he could feel it himself, Turk Elder quickly interposed:

"Mebbe you didn't hear him rightly, mate. Mebbe he ain't ready to croak jest yit, when a little bit o' good, clean work mought save him to repent, so to speak. Mebbe it wouldn't do no hurt ef you was to putt it a leetle mite plainer afore the critter, pard?"

Nor' West Nick bent lower and gazed keenly into those dark eyes as though seeking to read the whole truth therein. Then, drawing back a little, he spoke sharply, coldly, yet in the same guarded tones:

"You're in a bad box, Tim Warden—a mighty bad box, if you only knew it! A rope awaits you, as it does all the rest of your precious gang. If you don't do something to save yourself, the devil will shake you by the hand before the sun comes up again—*sure!*"

"We've got this thing down fine. Johnny-jump-up is over the divide, but he gave the whole thing away before he croaked. We know just where your gang is hiding. We know just what your arrangements are; but to make perfectly sure, we came out to gather a couple of you fellows in. If you talk straight, we'll give you a fair chance to cheat the gallows. If not—well, I told you what would come of it."

"Now there's a mate of yours on guard over yonder. We might take him by the same trick we played on you, but then again it might fail, sufficient for him to sound the alarm and put his fellows on guard. We would rather let a lesser rascal or two slip through the toils than to run the slightest risk of harm coming to the ladies and children. We give you that chance. Decoy that fellow here, and when pay-day comes, be sure you'll not be forgotten in the settlement."

The sullen look seemed to be fading from the face of the prisoner as Nor' West spoke rapidly, and then Turk Elder said:

"Let him talk a bit, mate. Ef he tries to sing too loud, I'll put the squibob onto him *too* quick!" and he drew his knife, holding the keen point so that it touched the throat of the outlaw.

"Send it home if he makes a sound louder than a whisper, Turk!" sternly uttered the fat detective as he removed the gag.

"I won't—I will!" gasped the captive, huskily.

"Clear as mud!" grinned Nor' West Nick, as the knife quivered.

"No row—do what say," gasped the trembling wretch, hastily.

"See that you do. I'll carve you into shoe-strings at the first crooked move or sound. Get up. Decoy your mate here, and remember that we are both watching you—both sworn to kill you without mercy if you don't act strictly on the square with us," sternly added Nick.

"If I slip up, it'll be his fault more'n mine," muttered the captive, nervously fingering his throat. "He'll come quick enough, when I offer a smell o' red lick. He's over yen' way. You'd better both take kiver thar, fer he's a tough nut to crack, is Fred!"

"I kin han'le him, I reckon," muttered Turk Elder, with a low laugh and significant nod to his partner. "You kin sorter boss the job, an' boss it best from nigh that chap, don't you think pard?"

"I'll keep him under reach of my hand, don't you worry, mate."

"I ain't tryin' to play no tricks on to ye," growled Warden.

"I don't mean to give you any chance," was the dry reply. "Now get down to business, and keep in mind your own precious carcass!"

Tim Warden waited until the two men were snugly hidden from sight of any one approaching his location, then crooked one finger in his mouth and sounded a low, trilling whistle. Almost immediately there came an answer, so similar as to seem more like an echo than a separate sound. And then Tim Warden raised his voice, crying softly:

"I say, you Fred!"

"Say yourself, an' what in thunder's got into ye?" came the reply, in coarse, gruff tones.

"A bite o' good whisky—nothin' shorter! Ef you don't want a snort, stay right whar you be, pard! I kin wrastle the bottle alone, I reckon," grumly retorted Warden, with an angry snort.

"Fa'r play, pard!" and with the words came the sounds of hasty footsteps. "I'll bloody murder ye ef you down the hull afore I kin git my sheer! Whistle—keep on a-whistlin' ontel I kin git thar, ye ongodly critter!"

Half in sport, half in earnest, the second guard rumbled forth these words at he hastened toward the position of his fellow sentry. He suspected naught of treachery or danger until it was too late to avoid or foil it. The huge figure of Turk Elder rose from ambush to one side and even as he stretched forth a hand to grasp the bottle, his mate held up in the moonlight, these mighty paws closed around his throat, effectually checking all outcry, while a leg kicked his feet from under him, and both men fell heavily to the ground.

"Watch t'other critter, mate!" muttered Turk Elder, warningly as he cast a swift glance over his shoulder. "I kin 'tend to this 'ne!"

Nor' West Nick saw that this was no idle boast for the big outlaw had almost ceased his struggles, the heavy fall having driven the breath out of his body, and before the decoy could fully divine his object, his hands were twisted behind his back and there secured by a stout pair of handcuffs. And five minutes later the two captives, each one ironed, each with a gag between his jaws, were being marched away from the vicinity of their adroit capture.

Their enforced journey was a short one, for soon after Nor' West Nick paused to utter a low, peculiar whistle, which was promptly echoed from the cover beyond, supplemented by the voice of Dan Brown:

"What news? What luck, Nick?"

"Good enough," with a low laugh. "Ketched a pair o' knaves in the draw!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A NOVEL METHOD OF PLAYING "DRAW."

NOR' WEST NICK felt a thousand times repaid for all the pains he had taken to effect the double capture when he heard the partially suppressed exclamation of grim delight which came as one sound from the lips of Dan Brown and Sol Scott.

Very differently were the prisoners affected by the same sounds. And bold, desperate men though they were, they shrunk away from those glowing eyes as they might have shrunk from streams of living fire.

"None o' your tricks on travelers, my co-veys!" muttered Turk Elder as his mighty grip tightened on them from behind. "Face the music, and do your prittiest, even ef you cain't sing fer sour apples!"

"And don't you forget the bargain I made with you before you agreed to decoy your fellow rascal into our clutches, Tim Warden," Nor' West Nick added, his words painfully dis-

tinct, at least to the ears of the luckless wretch addressed.

A muffled curse of angry surprise and hatred broke from the lips of Fred Ducrow, and only for the quick interposition of the ex-pugilist, he would have leaped at the throat of his treacherous comrade, ironed though they both were.

"You sold me—it was a cold deal, eh, Tim Warden?" he snarled, savagely, his dark eyes turning almost red beneath their shaggy brows as they met and sought to hold those shifting orbs. "I owe all this to you, then, old man?"

"I never—I didn't know nothin' ontel they ketched all two both on us!" mumbled the horse-thief, with a covert and venomous glance toward the smiling face of the fat detective from Rocky Bar.

"As you thought," and Nor' West Nick laughed softly, heartily. "It was as neat a bit of work in the double cross-way as I've seen for a long time! Each rascal buying his own life by selling the liberty of his fellow! Lord! what fools we mortals be!"

It was now the turn of Fred Ducrow to look surprised, and Tim Warden to turn indignant. Just as the shrewd representative from Rocky Bar calculated upon, each one felt that the other had acted the traitor and false comrade. And had their arms been at liberty, there is little doubt but what the Royal Flush then assembled would have been given a modern representation of the Kilkenny cats.

Nor' West Nick stepped warningly between them, holding in sight twin gags which he had deftly taken from their jaws when Dan Brown challenged their approach.

"Don't let your angry passions boil over, my dear fellows, or I'll be obliged to use these little sugar-tits again. I want you to talk—that's just what I took the trouble to fetch you here for—but not loud enough to disturb the entire neighborhood. That wouldn't be over healthy for either of you."

Those sullen suspicious glances were turned toward him, and though he gave no outward sign of annoyance, Nor' West Nick saw that instead of proving the perfect success he had anticipated, his thinly veiled charges of mutual treachery bade fair to destroy even the hope of extracting the much-needed information from the lips of Tim Warden.

Their anger and hatred seemed turned wholly upon him. They seemed to think he had deceived them even more thoroughly than was the fact. Even Tim Warden was growing savagely sullen.

Dan Brown, in the strangely impatient, hot-blooded mood which had been upon him ever since the first suspicion that his loved ones were threatened by his enemies, strode forward and clutched the nearest captive by the shoulder, his blue eyes glowing vividly, his voice hard and stern as he uttered:

"If you hope to see another sunrise, fellow, you'll talk quick and straight to the mark! Where is Aces-and? Where has he put his captives? Are they all together, or has he separated them?"

A surly growl came through the clinched teeth of Fred Ducrow.

"Find out, darn ye! It's rope-pullin', no matter what I say. Go on with your rat-killin'. The boss'll even up matters fer me!"

A strong but soothing hand fell on the shoulder of the half-distracted detective, and Enoch Dodge muttered in his ear:

"They's more'n one way o' skinnin' a cat, pard, an' ef I was you I'd draw back an' let Nick 'tend to the critter. He ketched 'em. He's got some sort o' purchase rigg'in' in his mind, or I'm 'way out."

Dan Brown hesitated, turning a wistful glance toward Nor' West Nick, who smiled confidently as he spoke:

"I can do it, pard, if you'll trust to me for a bit. Each one of these honorable scoundrels is just boiling over with eagerness to make a clean confession, and are only held back by their native modesty. Give me a few minutes' grace, and we'll know all the secrets of Aces-and, his gang, house, company and all else. I pledge you my word as one of the Royal Flush."

"From him, mebbe, but not me!" growled Ducrow, with a venomous glare at his mate in bonds. "An' ef he squeals, I'll be his death!"

"You'll have to strike the blow with a ghostly hand, then, my boy," laughed Nor' West Nick, as he motioned Turk Elder to bring his double charge further under cover.

With their hands ironed behind their backs, with that mighty grip on their shoulders, and with the other members of the Royal Flush walking within handy reach of them, neither of the captives made any attempt to escape while being conducted deeper into the cover, though each one knew that he was each moment passing further from aid and all hope of rescue.

"This will do," at length uttered Nor' West Nick, coming to a halt in the center of a little opening surrounded on all sides by trees and undergrowth. "We can talk and sing to our hearts' content here, and even indulge in the luxury of a fire, without fear of being intruded upon by Aces-and or his gang of cut-throats. Turk, suppose that you and Enoch start a little blaze, to throw some light on the subject?"

Without a word of objection the two men indicated set to work, and while they were thus engaged, Nor' West Nick "buzzed" the captives.

"It would be too much of a good thing to spare both your lives, boys, but I'll do the next best thing. The one that speaks up first, and tells the straightest story, shall have the exquisite pleasure of witnessing the elevation of his fellow—say, as high as one of those limbs over your heads! And it's not a very long tune that I ask of you, either; simply to tell us what arrangements Aces-and has made for receiving company; where he has stowed away his guests; no more."

There was no reply. Alone, either one of the rascals might have weakened in the presence of death, but together they seemed afraid to prove unfaithful to their vows. More than ever did Nor' West Nick realize the error into which he had fallen; but not a sign of this did he permit to show itself on the face or in his voice.

"One of you has got to give information, and the longer you put it off, the more trouble you cause us, the worse off you will be. I can make you talk, but I'd rather have a voluntary report. Will either of you give it?"

"I won't!" growled Ducrow, flashing a vicious glance toward his companion in bonds. "An' ef Tim does he'll wish he hedn't! You kin rub me out, but all the same the truth'll git to the ears o' the boss, an' he knows how to square a'counts with traitors—cuss all sich!"

"Traitor you, Fred Ducrow!" snarled Warden, showing his teeth. "You sold me out to these—"

"You lie! you done it, cuss ye! Didn't you call me up thar to take a snifter o' whisky, an' then—"

Nor' West Nick lightly tapped each pair of lips, his huge mustaches curling grimly.

"That's not the tune we want to listen to, gentlemen, if you please. Stick to the lesson. What about Aces-and?"

Sullen silence.

With a short, hard laugh, Nor' West Nick turned to his brother detectives, saying:

"Will you just keep an eye on these birds, mates? I'll not be long."

Dan Brown and Sol Scott stepped a little closer, and Nor' West Nick turned toward the spot where their horses were tethered, quickly returning with a couple of strong lariats in his hands.

By this time Enoch and Turk had started a fire, the crackling twigs beginning to light up the little glade and to reveal surrounding objects. And thus aided, Nor' West Nick had little trouble in casting the noosed ends of the lassoes over stout limbs above the clear space, each lariat having a bough to itself.

Suddenly the prisoners watched these preparations, but as yet neither one showed signs of giving way. Surely Nor' West Nick was making a serious mistake in keeping them together!

So Dan Brown appeared to think, for the anxious look deepened upon his pale, haggard face as he touched his brother detective on the arm.

The fat member of the Royal Flush shook his head positively.

"You are wrong and I am right, this time, friend," he uttered earnestly in response to that unspoken question. "Remember how much time was lost with Johnny-jump-up before we got at the truth. It might be the same thing over again with these brutes. Either one might squeal quicker if taken out of eye-range of the other, but would it be the truth, or a series of false notes?"

"They'll never betray a secret this way. Each one will be held in check through fear of the other!" muttered Dan Brown.

"Just the contrary," and Nor' West Nick laughed softly. "They are so hot against each other now that neither will dare lie, for fear his mate may nail it at once—don't you see?"

Dan Brown yielded, though still far from convinced that the reasoning was correct.

"Take your own way, Nick, but cut it as short as possible. Time is passing, and every minute they remain in his power is a double torture!"

"The preliminaries will consume more time than the real work, my dear fellow. Rest easy. We'll have the plain truth out of them in a very few minutes, now."

At a sign from the fat detective, a noose was fitted about each neck as the outlaws were led beneath the stout boughs. They stood some ten or a dozen feet apart, facing each other.

Another sign, and the prisoners were seated on the ground with more haste than grace or comfort. And then strong hands drew up their feet until both extremities almost met, while Nor' West Nick deftly completed his share of the programme.

He drew down on the rope which encircled the throat of Fred Ducrow until that worthy was on the point of suffocation, then knotted the free end around the ankles of Tim Warden. He reversed this performance, and when the other rope was tied to Warden's feet, he stepped back with a low chuckle of satisfaction, rubbing his fat hands together as he viewed the peculiar spectacle.

The prisoners faced each other, balanced on their posteriors. A rope ran from each neck straight up to a limb overhead, then passed at a sharp angle down to the feet of the opposite rascal. If one attempted to lessen the strain about his throat by lowering his feet and legs, it choked his opposite more severely, and *vice-versa*.

Nor' West Nick struck an attitude between his victims, saying:

"Now, gentlemen, the fun begins! How long it will last, depends mainly on yourselves. When you've had sufficient—when you think you can sing my song, and sing it straight from end to end without a single false note, all you've got to do is to signify as much. I'm going to set free your hands. You can use them on the rope that anchors your neighbor, as much as you please, but not to touch the rope that encircles your own neck. The first effort you make in that direction will be the signal for putting on the bracelets again, leaving the non-offender free to complete the hanging, if his strength holds out."

Even as he spoke, Nor' West Nick passed behind them in succession, unlocking and removing the handcuffs, then falling back to await the result.

His patience was not long tested. Already the strain occasioned by that doubled-up position was becoming painful, and each man sought to relieve himself at the expense of his fellow, the instant their hands were freed. They caught at the diagonal ropes and tugged savagely.

As a result their feet came nearer the ground, but this was accomplished at the expense of their throats! Owing to their hampered situation, neither man could gain more than a few inches of rope, but that was sufficient to produce in the other all the torture of hanging without the danger of death.

"Plenty of time, gentlemen!" cried Nor' West Nick, mockingly. "The night isn't much more than one-half spent as yet. Take it easy, and the fun 'll last all the longer!"

"Life to the one who will confess all we want to know!" uttered Dan Brown, earnestly. "Life and liberty to the one who first gives way! Death to you both if you remain stubborn!"

The end came right speedily. Weaker in body and spirit than his fellow, Tim Warden dropped the rope and flung out his hands appealingly. He tried to promise full admission, but the words were cut short by the tightening rope, as Ducrow, furious at the thought of defeat even in victory, cast all his strength into the effort, dragging his craven mate fairly clear of the ground.

The same effort almost dislocated his own neck, and as Nor' West Nick leaped forward and cut the rope, both men fell backward half-dead.

Turk Elder fastened on Fred Ducrow, replacing the handcuffs and holding the gag ready to slip between his jaws as soon as he could regain breath sufficient to keep from suffocating. The remainder of the Royal Flush gathered about Tim Warden, but Nor' West Nick picked him up and carried him out of sight of his mate.

"It's the truth we want, and that in the shortest possible time," he muttered hurriedly. "We'll hear this fellow tell his story, and then question his pard. If both tell the same story, we'll know it's the pure quill, and can act accordingly. If not—if he is fool enough to lie to us—I'll take his hide off by inches at a time!"

A feeble groan from the lips of the tortured outlaw told his captors that this threat had not entirely escaped his ears, and with new hopes they awaited the result.

Nor' West Nick gave Tim Warden a little whisky, and then propping his back up against a tree trunk, he spoke sharply:

"Now, my fine fellow, you want to sing straight as a string, or out goes your candle for good-and-all! You understand?"

Tim Warden nodded, licking his parched lips, glancing wistfully at the flask which the fat detective was recorking. Nor' West Nick laughed shortly as he noticed the direction of that glance.

"After a bit, if you are deserving! but until you've emptied your budget you can fast. You know what you have endured. You know now that we mean business right up to the handle. But you can't know all that is in store for you if you try to deceive us or play any tricks. Plain death isn't a circumstance to what you'll suffer if you stray from the one straight path!"

"I'll tell all—only spare my life!" gasped the wretch.

"You shall have that—life and liberty both if you serve us faithfully!" eagerly interposed Dan Brown.

"But you've got to earn it first," added Nor' West Nick, evidently thinking his brother detective too fast. "You want to tell us just how the game stands. Aces-and is in the cavern, over yonder?"

Tim Warden nodded assent.

"His prisoners are with him? Mind how you answer, now! We know enough of the truth to catch you in a lie, should you be ass enough to attempt one."

"The two wimmin is thar, in the little hole back o' the main cave. The children ain't—he sent 'em off in keer o' Johnny's Infant."

"Where? What for?" sharply demanded Sol Scott.

"I kin show you the place better then I kin deescribe it. As fer the why, I cain't say fer dead sartin', though I did ketch somethin' what the boys was talkin' 'bout."

"What was it? Speak out, you devil!" grated Dan Brown, his sinewy fingers working convulsively as though longing to tear the whole truth from the stammering lips of the cowed villain.

Tim Warden shrunk back, pale and trembling. Nor West Nick tapped him on the shoulder, saying quietly:

"You're all right as long as you talk straight and nimbly. What was it you heard the fellows talking about?"

"They said the boss was playin' his keerds so's to git part even, whether you bu'sted his main game all up or not. Ef you was to jump him at the cave afore he thought it, you mought save the wimmen, but the kids would hev to suffer. One o' the gang hes some o' the powder like you critters use. He hes orders to keep hid come's—jes' whar, I don't know—an' ef a row breaks out, he's to send up a light. The boys holdin' the kids is to be on the watch, an' the minnit they see that, they're to kill the young 'uns."

Tim Warden cowered beneath the arm of the fat detective, awed anew by the mad light which flashed from the eyes of the brother detectives. For a moment or two, his life hung in the balance. Four strong hands were almost ready to fly at his throat; but luckily for all concerned, the powerful temptation was resisted.

"You can guide us to the spot where the children are kept?"

"I kin—I will, ef you'll promise me— *Good Lawd!*"

Tim Warden broke short off with a gasping, husky ejaculation, and he cowered almost to the ground as a clear, quavering whistle broke out on the night from a point at no great distance from the timber.

The detectives also caught the sound, and silently listened for its repetition, hands on their weapons. It came in a few moments, and Dan Brown hissingly demanded of Warden:

"What does that mean? Speak quick, and speak true, you dog!"

"It's the boss! It's the signal o' Aces-and!" quavered Warden.

CHAPTER XIX.

QUEENS BETTER THAN ACES.

It was with a touch of railleury that Johnny-jump-up charged Aces-and with the possession of "nerves," the bane of all thorough gamblers, yet none the less was his accusation true. Aces-and did possess nerves, and nerves of the quality that would fail a man just when his wits should be the clearest, his courage the least unshaken.

They lasted long enough to reach the cavern and separate the captives into two divisions, then fairly alarmed their owner by giving way in a moment, without warning.

Even as he left the rock cell where the two women were confined, Aces-and caught himself starting and trembling with a sudden dread. It seemed as though a voice uttered bitter threats in his ears. He half-drew a weapon and crouched on guard before he realized that it was but the freak of an overtaken nerve—that the voice of Dan Brown was born only of his imagination.

He knew this, yet by the time he gained the outward chamber, his garments seemed damp with cold sweat, his eyes roved swiftly, nervously about him, his face was pale and his breath came fast and irregularly.

He knew what was the matter with him as soon as he came within the circle of light spread about by the flickering candles, and though he choked it down as best he could, it was only through the liberal use of the bottle that he could regain his self-control. It was not often that he permitted himself to "hit the bottle" heavily, for he knew that strong drink blurred his wits and led him too often into freaks which his sober judgment would condemn severely. But now he felt that without some such stimulant, he would break down in earnest.

"A bit of grub, a sound snooze, and then I'll be in trim again!" he muttered to himself.

Unfortunately for him, Aces-and did not stick closely to this wise programme. As the liquor mounted to his brain, his blood began to grow hotter, his hatred for his brother detectives to increase and call on him for revenge.

"If I had either of them under my thumb this night, I'd be willing to abandon all my chances in the future!" the kidnapper muttered half-laughingly, his dark eyes beginning to glow redly. "If I could only torture them as—as I can, through their wives!" and his white teeth came together with a vicious click. "Why not? It's part of the game. Maybe it will cool off my brain a bit. Maybe it'll make sleep come the easier! I'll have a shake at it, anyhow!"

Thus it came about that the two women were subjected to a second infliction almost before they had time to recover from the first. And the head villain laughed maliciously as he noted their pale faces, where the traces of tears were still plainly visible; rubbing his hands in devilish

glee as he saw how heavily his last blow had sunk into their hearts.

"It's nothing to what is in store for you, my dainty beauties," he said, his tongue slightly thickened, his gaze passing from one face to the other, gloatingly. "Fate must have had an especial spite against you when he threw you into the arms of those bloodhounds! For their sins you are called upon to suffer, and through you, your children. How bitterly, neither I nor you can as yet say positively."

"Was it only to mock our misery that you came?" uttered Rachael Brown, her eyes flashing, her temper only kept within bounds by a severe exercise of her strong will.

"To take a taste of the revenge I have sworn to get gloriously drunk on, rather!" and Aces-and bowed mockingly. "You are part and parcel of Dan Brown of Denver. You are the better half of Sol Scott. And being one with them, what you suffer must torture them as well. You see my meaning, gentle doves? You follow me, my beauties?"

May Scott turned paler than ever, and sunk a little behind her stronger spirited companion in captivity. She, with Rachel, saw that Aces-and had been drinking freely, and knowing not what insane freak might seize upon him next, she sought to collect her strength and nerve.

Aces-and saw her involuntary recoil, and evidently interpreted it aright, for a low, malicious laugh came through his teeth, and a mocking sneer curled his bearded lips.

"Not so early in the game, my little lady. It may come to that in the end, though I'm one of the sort that has but little use for the fair sex, save in cases something like the present. You are safe enough from love-making on my part, until after I've settled accounts with your pet bloodhounds—until the ransom money is paid over and fairly put beyond danger of recapture. Then—well, if I can wring the hearts of my enemies one bit tighter by squeezing either or both of you, be sure I'll never let my touch of misogyny stand in the way."

"You are drunk and know not what you say," coldly uttered Rachel Brown, facing the rascal firmly, haughtily, her eyes glowing hardily. "If you are wise, you will go where you can sleep off your folly. Be sure you will need all your wits when it comes to a test between your evil gang and our husbands!"

"Don't you think it, pretty," chuckled the outlaw, with a knowing leer, as he recovered from a sudden lurch that almost cast him headlong to the floor. "I'm master of the hounds now, and when my whip cracks, never a sullen cur among them all but drops his tail and trembles lest he feel the lash. With you and the kids I hold the game in my own hand. I can name my own terms. I will, too! And they'll be such as strips Dan Brown and Sol Scott of every dollar and every dollar's worth! When I'm through with them, they'll be beggars on the face of the earth, if no lower. If, did I say?" and a cold, chilling laugh parted his lips as his figure drew erect, all traces of drunkenness vanishing as by magic.

He came a step nearer, his right hand uplifted and quivering in the air, his eyes glowing redly, his white teeth showing through his bearded lips, his voice harsh and bitterness itself:

"There is no room left for an 'if'! I will strip them dry. I will wring their hearts even more thoroughly than I do their pockets. I will torture them until they beg and pray for death to come and cut short their utter wretchedness. I will first befool them. I will raise their hopes, only to cast them down again to the lowest pit of misery. I will take their gold and then bid them wait—wait and wait in vain!"

"Bah! dearly as I love gold, it is hardly the first factor in this big game of mine. I am after revenge, and that I'll have when your pet bloodhounds can give no more wealth. When they ask for their loved ones—when they beg me to deliver the precious goods for which they have paid such a price—I'll laugh them to scorn! I'll kick them out to live and suffer! I would kill them, only I know life will be to them worse than death, a thousandfold!"

"With you two and your kids in our midst, they'll never dare obstruct our path. I'll leave this country. I'll threaten them until they give us plenty of room; and then I'll make my revenge complete."

"Not by death, not by killing either of you," and he uttered a short, curdling laugh, his eyes seeming like coals of living fire. "Then neither Dan Brown nor Sol Scott would believe one-half the black and bitter truth. I'll set you free, and bid you crawl back to them, to tell your story. To tell the happy fathers how their children left this world! To tell them bit by bit what came to you, my dainty ducks!"

Aces-and had given way entirely to the fiery liquor, that seemed to set his brain reeling and to drive away the last remnant of prudence. He only thought of torturing his captives, leaving the future to take care of itself. And yet, as his tongue rattled on viciously, the women could see that he was telling the simple truth, that he really counted on bringing all this to pass. And Rachel Brown grew desperate as she felt that they were so hopelessly in his power—that neither Dan Brown nor Sol Scott, with

the remainder of the Royal Flush to back them, could do aught to foil his devilish schemes, unless—

With a low moan of bitter agony, she sunk down near the rocky wall and bowed her head in her lap, with back turned toward the exulting demon. He laughed harshly, feeling the sweetness of his revenge. And then he turned his tongue more particularly upon May Scott, who still faced him, her limbs trembling, her eyes filled with a wild, hunted light.

"All this, and more, my dainty little witch! When I bid you return to your adoring husband, you'll know more of life than he could or would teach you in a century! You'll be wiser, if not—"

He ceased abruptly, though it was hardly of his own accord.

Rachel Brown rose to her feet without a particle of noise. Aces-and was partly turned from her, and without a moment's hesitation she sprung toward him, her hands going up, then falling with all the strength lent by utter desperation. There came a sudden thump, and Aces-and reeled forward to sink to his knees, then drop on his face without a cry or sound beyond that first gurgling moan!

"Courage, May!" almost fiercely breathed Rachel as she leaped upon the fallen villain and clasped his throat with her nervous fingers. "It is life or death, now! Think of them—think of your child and your husband! Think of them, and help me draw the teeth of this demon!"

It was a timely appeal. May Scott was on the point of swooning, but she rallied and came to the assistance of her bolder companion, a little blindly, but still working with good effect.

"Take his belt of weapons from him first," panted Rachel. "Kill him if he should get the better of me! We can suffer no worse at the hands of his men than at his, should he conquer after this!"

She need not have given this warning. Aces-and was little better than a dead man just then. The stone which Rachel had so adroitly secured for a weapon, wrapped tightly in her apron, had driven the senses out of him, and he lay like one dead. So like, indeed, that a new fear seized upon the desperate woman.

She counted on using him as a means of securing their escape to the outer world. If dead, he would be worse than useless for this.

"Thank heaven! he lives!" Rachel Brown breathed a few moments later. "I can feel his heart throb, faintly!"

"It would be awful, to have even *his* blood upon your hands," said May Scott, with a nervous little laugh that was almost hysterical. "But—I could never thank heaven for *his* life!"

"You will, dear, when you know all I have in mind," more calmly uttered Rachel as she drew the keen knife from its scabbard and slit the leather belt into strips. "First, we'll tie and gag the rascal."

Still wondering, but too deeply agitated to put her doubts into words, May Scott lent her aid to render the chief of the kidnappers secure. His hands were tightly bound behind his back. A strip of leather confined his ankles. A gag was formed of a part of his garments, tightly rolled up in a handkerchief, ready to be slipped between his jaws as soon as he should show signs of returning consciousness. And then, with a revolver in each hand, Rachel Brown stood at the entrance ready to open fire on any of the outlaws whom chance might send that way before Aces-and could be utilized as she intended.

It was only a brief period before May Scott gave the cautious warning that Aces-and was recovering his senses, though it seemed like an age to the woman on guard. Despite her outward composure, her stern resolve to die before permitting his rescue, poor Rachel was being terribly tried. There was so much at stake! So much—and she but a weak woman!

As Aces-and opened his eyes, a curse parted his lips, but before he could even dimly realize what had happened, a gag was forced between his teeth, and firmly secured behind his head. Then—

His own revolver stared him fairly between the eyes. His own keen knife rested with its point against his throat. And while May Scott waited in readiness to send the bright steel home, Rachel Brown was talking sober business over the leveled revolver.

"You see, Asa Sand, the cards can't always run your way!" and as she spoke her low, cold tones sent a peculiar thrill through the rascal's veins. "It is my deal now, and like you, I'll give you a glimpse at my hand before I play it."

"I hold your life at my finger's end. I'll take it without mercy if you refuse to fall in with my plans, or if they threaten to miscarry through the interference of your ruffians. You want to take this in clearly, rascal, for your life hinges upon it."

With a sudden effort Aces-and strove to burst his bonds and to shout out a warning to his men. But in vain. The bonds had been carefully applied, and were strong enough to defy his utmost efforts. And the keen point of the knife penetrated the skin of his throat until he ceased his struggles, a new and chilling dread assailing him—the fear of death!

"You are only making matters worse, poor fool!" coldly added Rachel Brown, her red lips curling in scorn, her dark eyes all aglow. "You are doubly risking your life. If any of your ruffians should chance to come this way, they could not save you, be the result to us what it might. I swear by my children to kill you rather than permit your escape!"

Aces-and shivered anew, for he could not doubt her intense earnestness now. He knew that she would carry out her threats without the slightest hesitation, should the occasion arrive. And as he sunk back in sullen fear, he hoped that his men would keep their distance, quite as ardently as he had hoped for their coming but a moment before.

Rachel was quite cool enough to note the effect of her words, and with increased confidence she resumed:

"There is only one hope of your saving your worthless life for a few hours or days. I am about to point out that chance. If you reject it, so much the worse for you, since it will not be offered again.

"We are about to set your feet and your tongue at liberty. We are going to take you by the arm, one on each side, and march you out through the cavern. We will each hold a pistol at your breast, and if a hand is lifted to bar our way, two bullets will seek your heart! This we swear by all the world holds dear and precious to us!"

"By our husbands and our children! By our hopes of a blessed hereafter!" solemnly added May Scott, all traces of fear vanishing from her face, her voice ringing out clear and firm as that of her friend.

"You are warned," said Rachel as she cut the leather thongs and permitted the bleeding ruffian to stagger to his feet. "You can elect life or death, at your pleasure. Come! we are going out to freedom!"

It was a strange scene then presented! A woman on each side, holding fast to his arms, their other hands pressing a cocked pistol to his chest. And mingled with the look of fear on his face, was an expression of intense shame and mortification.

"They'll kill you rather than let you go!" he muttered, huskily, as the women forced him toward the narrow passage.

"They will seal your death-warrant at the same time," was the icy retort. "Your tongue is free. Use it when the time comes. Tell them that we will stand no trifling. That you die at their first attempt to bar our passage. That is sworn to!"

And this was the spectacle that burst upon the astonished eyes of the kidnappers in the main chamber a moment later. No wonder that they leaped to their feet with cries of wondering indignation. But before the quickest hand among them all could draw a weapon, Rachel cried:

"Aces-and dies at your first move, you rascals! Give us free passage to the outer air—free passage to the horses, or he dies!"

"It's so, lads," growled the discomfited kidnapper, flushing hotly at having to make the admission even in the jaws of death. "They've got me foul. They'll kill me if you don't make way. Let them go!"

Hotter still he flushed, then turned pale as death as he heard the low, angry mutterings which ran around the rock chamber. He knew that he had fallen very low in the estimation of his own rascals by his craven fear, that he could never hope to regain his former high station in their opinions. If rascals, they numbered few cravens among them.

Yet even now they showed how firmly discipline had been insisted upon while at work, for they fell back, leaving the passage clear for the escape of their valuable captives. Curse and frown they might, but Aces-and was still their chief, and as such entitled to prompt obedience. And the head rascal began to breathe a little freer.

Rachel Brown felt this by the thrill that ran along his arm, and she held him more firmly, pressed the pistol closer to his side as she spoke rapidly, sternly:

"Your chief bears us company until we are safely mounted and ready to ride away. Until then we hold his life in our hands. Until then you will remain as you are. If one ventures to follow, it will seal his fate as surely as though the heavens fell!"

She slowly forced the chief kidnapper toward the cave entrance, keeping her glowing eyes fixed on the doubting, irresolute outlaws, her finger in readiness to put the fatal pressure on the trigger at the first sign of interference.

And then, as the narrow passage was gained, and only a few feet separated them from the outer air, a glad cry escaped her lips. Too soon!

With a sharp cry Aces-and flung himself face downward, just as strong hands grasped the women—but then two pistol-shots rung out, their red glare lighting up the strange scene.

CHAPTER XX.

BEGINNING OF THE LAST DEAL.

It was a desperate chance Aces-and took to save himself and regain control of his valuable

hostages, but the foul fiend seemed to be his patron saint, and success rewarded his effort.

Knowing that the two brave women did not suspect, that two of his gang were constantly kept on guard at the entrance to the cavern, Aces-and trusted that they were still at their posts. If drawn away by the sounds which had accompanied the little procession of three—if they were among those gathered in the main chamber: and he dared not make the attempt to count the rascals while those small but stern hands were urging him on—he knew that little short of a miracle could preserve his life. But it was a chance, and the only one he saw of redeeming himself and preserving his show of winning the big game.

With a desperate effort he tore loose from those hands, flinging himself face down in the passage to avoid the pistol-shots, at the same time striking out with both hands in the hope of tripping his captors up, not only saving himself, but detaining them long enough for his rascals to effect their recapture.

A wild curse of rage and pain escaped his lips as he felt a stinging yet stunning pain shoot through his every fiber. He knew that at least one of those shots had hit him, and he felt that death was claiming him. Like one in a dream he distinguished angry cries, savage oaths, panting breaths and confused strugglings at the mouth of the entrance, only a few feet beyond where he lay. And then—heavy feet trampled over him, drawing a groan of agony from his partially benumbed lips.

"The boss!" ejaculated one of the outside guards, as he entered the main chamber, bearing on one arm the fainting form of May Scott, his fellow following with Rachel Brown, disarmed, helpless, yet stern and defiant. "He's in thar, livin' yit I reckon, from the way he groaned out when I tromped onto him, onawar's. Look to him, you critters!"

There was but a scanty show 'of haste made by the kidnappers, and one of the party even muttered in an audible tone:

"I ain't goin' to break my neck hurryin'! A full-grown man as'd let two wimmen take his guns an' march him out through a gang like he did—ugh!"

"You don't want to let the boss hear you sing them kind o' tunes, Tinklin' Bill," significantly muttered the man who held May Scott on his arm, casting a swift glance toward the darkened passage. "He ain't the fust man as got fooled by a petticut, nur I don't reckon he'll be the last. Ef they did take him, he tuck them back ag'in, didn't he? Ef he let 'em lead him through the gang, it was only so's to ketch 'em all the more sart'in."

"With your help," muttered the other.

"He didn't wait fer that," was the swift retort. "We see him comin', but he was outlined 'ginst the light, while we lay low. He couldn't be sure we was thar yit. It was a even chance we'd run in when the bobbery broke out here. He didn't wait to see. He tuck his chances an' made the rifle, slick as grease! An' while we're talkin' here, mebber he's lyin' in thar, bleedin' to death!"

"Or dead—wuss luck!" growled the other guard.

That was sufficient. Let his faults be what they might, Aces-and was their chief, and his value as such seemed to suddenly strike the kidnappers with unusual force. And with angry, vengeful glares toward the two fair captives, some one lifted the savage cry:

"They done it, cuss 'em! They done it, but they shan't ever live to make thar' brags! Kill the bloody hussis! Drap 'em, Davey! Turn 'em over, Mose!"

"A fair shake fer us all—no skullduggery!"

The ruffian in charge of May Scott gave a savage snarl, crying:

"You durned fools! didn't I say the boss was alive? Didn't I tell ye he give a groan as I tromped onto him onawar's? An' we gabbin' here while mebber he's bleedin' out his life in thar! Here! you—ketch hold!"

The fellow broke off abruptly, flinging his fair burden into the arms of his nearest mate, then turned to dash back into the dark passage, when he was saved the trouble by Aces-and staggering forth into the circle of light cast by the candles.

A grim and ghastly-looking object, too, with his powder-blackened face, with the blood flowing freely from a wound in his cheek, and with another widening crimson stain on his shoulder. In one hand he grasped a cocked revolver, which he had caught up from the rock floor where it had dropped from the grasp of one of the two women. He glared around the group of kidnappers, his dark eyes glowing like balls of living fire, seeming to be in search of a sneer or mocking smile.

But there were none to be seen. The ruffians shrunk back a little, but each man was careful to keep his hands from close proximity to his weapons. They knew Aces-and must be "red-hot" over his shameful humiliation before them all, and would be only too eager and ready to wipe off the score in the heart's blood of the first man who gave him even the ghost of an excuse.

"Three cheers fer ther boss, an' the slick way

he tuck to let the ladies down easy!" cried Tinkling Bill, rapidly "hedging" as the best method of covering the reckless venture he had made but a little while before. "They ain't 'nother critter in seventeen States as could 'a' wound up the job so slick!"

Aces-and lifted his armed hand, and the cheer was smothered in its birth. His glittering eyes were fixed upon the face of Tinkling Bill with an intenseness that made the squat ruffian shrink and cower, cursing his headlong haste to kick at a fallen lion. Could it be that Aces-and had overheard his speech?

Hardly, else a bullet would have wiped out the memory before this. So he thought, but he was terribly uneasy until those keen eyes passed on to other faces. And little by little he slunk back and Aces-and spoke sharply:

"All who are not particular enemies of mine, will blot from their minds everything that has occurred within the last few minutes. If a mistake has been made—if a fault committed—all has been rectified in good time. As for the rest—I'll satisfy the curious!"

Savagely, defiantly Aces-and glared around over the downcast faces of his men. He seemed eager to catch some excuse for using his weapon, but none was offered. And then, with a short, cold laugh, he added:

"Bring the ladies back to their prison. I'll see that they play no more tricks of this description. They don't seem able to appreciate polite treatment; we'll see how they relish the contrary!"

He strode on ahead, followed only by the two guards, each man with one of the captives. And when once within the little rock cell, Aces-and had them bound hand and foot, then placed side by side on the rude pallet of grass and blankets.

He said not a word to them, but the devilish glow in his eyes told both Rachel and May, again in possession of her senses, that he had neither forgotten nor forgiven their victory over him. A time of reckoning would come, and then—

Never very loquacious, Aces-and was sullenly silent as he returned to the outer chamber and sat down to have his wounds cleansed and dressed. The strong liquor was still seething in his brain, and making his blood course hotly through his veins. The air in the cavern seemed to choke him, and when the rude surgery was completed, when his hurts were all bandaged, giving his face a grim and repulsive look, he rose and without a word to his fellows, passed out from the cavern into the cool night air.

For a brief space Aces-and strode to and fro at the base of the slope up which the cave entrance lay, thinking only of cooling his fevered blood and easing his throbbing brain. He tried to fight off all thoughts of his recent adventure, for it was most disagreeable food for reflection; but the more he tried, the less perfectly did he succeed.

The cool, fresh air was rapidly sobering him off, and as his wits grew clearer, he all the more realized what a miserable fool he had shown himself that night! To risk all for the poor satisfaction of taunting two helpless women! To show them his real cards—to give them a clew which they might yet follow up to his utter defeat and the loss of his big game! It was worse than folly—it was a crime!

Not until now had he fully realized it. Not until now had he seen by what a terribly narrow margin had he escaped death and defeat of all his dearest schemes! And as he realized this, a new fear took hold upon his shaken nerves.

He began to distrust the good faith and the vigilance of his men who were stationed about the cavern to give warning of the approach of the enemy or his spies. He began to fear that some one among them all might be tempted to betray him—to desert his post and hasten with the news to the Royal Flush! He even muttered a curse over the long delay in the return of Johnny-jump-up. What if he was playing a double game? What if he should—

With a savage oath Aces-and shook off the thought. Whatever the rest of the gang might prove, John Sand was true and trusty!

"All the same, it won't do any harm to take a look after the lads on guard duty," he muttered, more for the sake of occupation than from any fear of their proving faithless, now that he had thrown off those morbid musings.

He had no difficulty in finding the man stationed nearest the cave entrance, the same to whom had been intrusted the power which would send up the signal of death in case of need.

"Keep your eyes open, my good fellow," muttered Aces-and. "You know your duty. If trouble comes to us from those hellhounds—if you hear me give the signal—send up the smoke for Johnny's Infant to put the kids out of the way. You have only that to look after. You are not to mix in any row at the cave until the light goes up. You sabb?"

The ruffian nodded grimly.

"I was waitin' fer your signal a bit ago, boss, when the row broke out in yender," with a nod toward the cavern. "I hed the stuff ready—see!" and he lifted the corner of a hide, showing

the red glowing coals of fire in a little pit beneath.

"I can trust you, I see," laughed Aces-and as he turned away.

His next search was made in the direction where Nor' West Nick and Turk Elder so adroitly captured the other two guards. He did not know just where they had taken up their stations, and though he passed directly over the spot where the capture had taken place, the moonlight was not sufficiently clear to show him the few telltale signs retained by the flinty soil. And so, occasionally sending forth his low, quavering whistle, he passed on—to meet his doom!

As he uttered his signal again, his roving eyes caught a glimpse of the little fire built in the timber, and with an angry curse he strode forward. He meant to savagely rebuke the recklessness of his sentinels, believing that they had kindled the fire, but before he could obtain a fair view of the strange scene in the little glade, a dark form parted the shrubbery and shot through the air at his throat.

So swift and deadly was the attack that he had time neither for drawing a weapon nor for uttering a warning yell to his men. Sinewy fingers met about his throat with a vise-like grip. The weight of his foeman hurled him heavily to the ground, and his head striking against a rock, his strained muscles relaxed and he lost all consciousness.

Only for a few moments, but those sufficed to place him wholly in the power of the man whom he hated and feared more than all others on earth—Dan Brown of Denver!

"Don't kill him, pard!" huskily cried Sol Scott, as his strong hand caught his brother detective by the arm. "Hold him as security for our loved ones! His life must answer for their safety!"

"Never fear for me, pard," and Dan Brown laughed coldly, hardly, his face pale as that of a corpse, but his blue eyes glowing vividly. "An easy death is not for the likes of him!"

With a savage force, the detective broke the fastenings of the belt about the waist of his captive, tossing it with its weapons to one side. It fell where the clear moonlight fell upon it, glancing back from the polished metal mountings; but none among the party noticed this fact then, nor would they have given the fact a second thought if they had, so great was their excitement over this lucky stroke of fate!

"It is the durned cuss, sure enough!" chuckled Enoch Dodge as he bent over the captive, just now beginning to show signs of recovering his scattered senses. "Better snap the darbies onto him, mate. He's too big game fer to run any resks with!"

"Not yet," and Dan Brown laughed—a laugh that sent the cold chills racing over his prisoner, so full of deadly hatred and vengeance was his voice. "Let him see where he is and in whose power, first. Let him feel how utterly helpless he is in the hands of a man! Let him have one taste of—Ha! you are waking up, Mr. Aces-and?"

With a strength that was lent by the excitement of the moment, the Denver detective lifted him into the air with one hand, shaking him as a bulldog might shake a terrier, then setting him upon his feet so that they stood face to face with nothing to interpose between their eyes. And though he strove with all his will and nerve to meet that blazing gaze, the eyes of Aces-and had to droop, had to sink and cover themselves with their lids.

A hard, bitter laugh parted the lips of the detective, and utter scorn filled the tones in which he uttered the words:

"And it is a craven cur like this that sets himself up against the Royal Flush! A pitiful imitation of a man—a miserable hound without a spark of courage or grit—bah!"

Aces-and flushed hotly, then turned ashen pale again. Those words cut him to the quick, and served to spur his flagging courage.

"Man enough to defy you and all your crew of bloodhounds, Dan Brown!" he snarled, viciously. "Man enough to laugh in your face—to remind you that if you have taken me by a clumsy trick, your wife and your children are still in my power!"

"They will not be so long," coldly retorted the detective.

"They'll be worth precious little to you when they fall into your hands, be sure of that," laughed the kidnapper. "Not alive—don't you think it, you hound!"

He might have said more, but he felt that deadly grip tightening upon his arms, and the old fear came chilling back to his heart. He felt that he must not say too much, else those terrible fingers might shift to his throat. And then—

"Johnny-jump-up said much the same, but he changed his tune before the end," coldly laughed Dan Brown, as he felt the sudden quiver that ran along the muscles of his captive.

"A lie! He never knew the meaning of the word fear! He would spit on you before—bah!" with a short, harsh laugh. "I'm a fool to mind your words. Johnny is safe enough!"

"And you know you are lying when you say that," was the cold retort. "Why has he not

returned to report? Why are we here in his place, unless he told us where and how to find you?"

Aces-and made no reply to these bitter words. He felt that they had a foundation in truth, and his heart failed him. He cast a swift glance around him, his gaze momentarily arrested by the gleaming point where his belt of weapons lay. A brief flash in his eyes, then they quickly turned back to the face of his captor.

"All the same, you dare not kill me. On my life hinges the lives of your loved ones. If I do not return within a certain length of time to the place where they are held cap—"

"To the little room beyond the main cavern, over yonder, why don't you say?" sneeringly demanded Dan Brown.

"Never mind where they may be," sullenly.

"They are under the hands and eyes of twenty good men, each one of whom is sworn to kill them rather than run the faintest chance of their escape. You may kill me, but even in death I will have my revenge—curse you all!"

"Twenty, less three, why don't you say?" mockingly. "Johnny-jump-up is past striking an enemy, no matter how weak and helpless. And right in here we have two more of your boasted score—two of the good men and true who would suffer death rather than betray their trust! Bah! you cowardly cur! They are like you; ready to sell their own souls for a red cent, much less the hope of cheating the hangman!"

"Scott, old friend, trot out Tim Warden, and let him sing his little song of freedom over again, where it can blister the ears of Aces-and! Make the cur come. Make him tell over where Johnny's Infant has our children in charge. Show Aces-and how completely his big game has gone bust! Give him a glimpse of—"

While the half-crazed detective was uttering these words, Aces-and began to realize how completely the tide was turning against him. He knew that unless he could give these men the slip, his course was run; that worse than a score of deaths would be visited upon him for the bitter wrongs he had committed.

He knew how cunning, how bold, how terrible the Royal Flush had often proven itself. He had heard enough to be sure they were fully acquainted with the steps he had taken to insure his revenge in case of disaster. They would recapture the children. They would surprise his men at the cavern. They would kill him, by tortures too frightful even to imagine. They would win the big game, and he would be worse than foiled, even in death. Unless—

One swift, covert glance at the belt of weapons. If he could only reach that—only fire one shot to put his men on guard!

And in utter desperation he struck Dan Brown a double blow with his clinched fists, tearing himself free and darting to the belt, uttering a wild yell as he did so. He gained the spot, caught at the nearest revolver butt—only to fall in a quivering heap as a bright gleam of steel hissed through the air, hiding itself in his neck!

With a hoarse curse, Dan Brown recovered himself and leaped to the spot, grasping Aces-and—only to stagger back with a low groan.

"Dead! And with him dies all hope of rescuing our wives! May God forgive you for this, Enoch Dodge—I never can!"

CHAPTER XXI.

JOHNNY'S INFANT PASSES OUT.

"WHAT else was they to do?" slowly asked Enoch Dodge, his hard face pale and grave, his tones shaking just a trifle as he stood before his bosom friend. "Would it 'a' bin better to stan' by an' let him go free to finish up his deviltry?"

"Anything but his death!" slowly muttered Dan Brown, one trembling hand clutching at his own throat, where something appeared to be choking him. "Alive, even if a cripple, we would have had a hold on those hellhounds of his! Dead—it may be their doom as well!"

"It would 'a' bin ef the p'izen critter hed got hold o' the gun he was reachin' fer," soberly retorted Dodge. "It wasn't to fight or to fend hisself he wanted it wu'st. It was to burn powder that'd tell his gang to kill an' murder. Who I leave fer you to tell!"

The gaunt member of the Royal Flush turned away, hiding his face from the clear moonlight, so that not even his friends could see how deep and bitter those words had cut him.

Nor' West Nick was squatting beside the body of Aces-and, examining the nature of his hurt with an eye that was true and critical as that of a professional. Right at the base of the skull the keen-pointed missile had entered, severing the spine and producing instant death.

It was by far too merciful a doom for such a ruthless villain, but he was beyond the reach of his enemies now, and Nor' West Nick rose to his feet just as Enoch Dodge uttered those words.

"It's the gospel you're listening to, pard," and his fat paw fell heavily on the shoulder of the half-distracted detective. "I saw the same thing when my gun was ready to wing the devil, and I held my hand. Burning powder would tell the rascals we were at hand, and then good-bye to our chances of getting the ladies and children out of the grip of those imps of Satan! You know this—or would if your poor brain

was on its usual level. And when it gets back there, you'll never feel right until you've asked the old man's pardon for those hard words of yours!"

"Drap it, Nick," coldly uttered Enoch Dodge. "I ain't whinin'."

He shook his shoulder roughly as a hand touched it, but the grip tightened, and he turned with an angry ejaculation, to face Dan Brown instead of the fat member of the Royal Flush, as he had expected.

That pale, haggard face bore a strangely softened look. There were tears in those keen, blue eyes. The strong voice quivered and sounded husky as the words passed his lips:

"I was mad, old friend, and knew not what I said. Forgive me. Blot them out of your memory, and—"

What a change came over that rugged countenance! What a glorious light leaped into those gray eyes! And as his bony hand grasped that of his friend—the one living creature whom he fairly loved—the ex-mayor of Grenada almost danced for joy.

"Lord love ye, lad, I never noticed it! It glanced off like rain-drops on a duck's back, an' never left no more 'pression then them! I knowed you didn't mean 'em, but all the same, they cut clean through my fool heart wu'ss then a thousan' knives. Fer you to fault me, lad—"

His voice choked up, and wringing the hand of Dan Brown with an energy that almost cracked its bones, Enoch Dodge turned away again.

"It is unlucky, sure enough, but we are no worse off than we were before Aces-and—may the foul fiend make his bed this night!—came this way," uttered Sol Scott, speaking for the first time since the chief of kidnappers made his desperate break for liberty and revenge combined. "If those other scoundrels haven't given us the slip during the excitement!"

"They're right whar you want 'em when you want 'em, boss!" called out faithful Turk Elder, who had immediately fastened upon the two captives, one hand gripping each throat to check all possible warning, the instant the approach of Aces-and was noticed.

"If that yelp of his hasn't alarmed the hounds!" muttered Dan Brown, who, ever since his loved ones were proved to be in peril, had apparently wholly changed his nature.

Until then he never seemed to think failure possible. He never desponded, no matter how black the case, how heavy the odds against his triumph. But now—he was gloomy, foreboding, doubting, fearful.

"I don't think that," promptly responded Sol Scott. "If the alarm had spread, we would almost surely hear something of it. I have heard nothing. All is silent in that direction," with a glance toward the cavern.

Dan Brown seemed to feel a rebuke hidden in these calm words, and a momentary flush passed across his pale features. His tones were more even than before, though they still contained a deep regret for what had happened.

"I'll try to think it's all for the best, mate, though I could wish that demon still lived. I meant to make him lead me through his gang to our dear ones. I could have guarded them while the rest of you closed in on the outfit. But he is dead—more my fault than that of any one else, too!"

Enoch Dodge turned quickly and his gray eyes shone, as he said:

"Ef I promise you that you kin make that same raffle even yit, Dan, will you fergit your hard feelin's to'rds the ole man? Will you wipe out the thought that give that cuss birth?"

"Not a curse, old friend—I didn't mean—"

"It sounded mightily like one, anyhow," and Dodge smiled faintly, as he suffered his hand to be grasped and shaken. "Call it what you like, you know what I mean. Ef I'll give you a dead sure show to git through them imps o' Satan, will you fergit it all?"

"If you will forgive, dear fellow!" was the broken response.

Enoch Dodge laughed softly, and his sinewy fingers closed around those of his friend. His tones were cheerful and as of old, then.

"Lord love ye, lad, that was done afore the hot words was dry onto your two lips! I knowed it wasn't your sober self that said 'em. I see they cut you nigh as deep as they did me, even when you was hottest. I was a fool fer noticin' 'em at all, but sence I hev, we'll drap it now fer good an' all."

"Look ye, Dan. Time's a-passin' in a heap hurry, an' they's lots o' work to be did afore the sun comes up. Fu'st, you want to look after the kids, as the easiest job o' the two. Ef you kin git along 'thout my help in this, why—"

"We can, of course, if there is need," was the response, as the ex-mayor of Grenada hesitated.

"They's only three o' the critters, ef that warmin't didn't lie, which I'm nigh ready to take oath he was tellin' a straight story fer to save his precious neck! You kin easy manidge them. An' when you come back hyar, Dan, the ole man'll give ye a key to the place whar the two madams is locked up."

"If you can—if you can place me between them and those hellhounds, Enoch—I'll be your willing slave until death!" huskily uttered Dan

Brown, in tones barely articulate, so intense was his emotion.

"I'll do it, sure, lad, an' never stop to 'mind ye of the nigger part," laughed Enoch Dodge, all clouds vanishing from his face. "Lord! who knows? Mebbe the ole man ain't nigh so near played out as he looks! Mebbe—but we kin do better than talky-talky all the time."

"Just what I'm thinking," gravely uttered Sol Scott. "Every minute we waste now is one less chance to save our dear ones. At any moment we are liable to discovery, as with Aces-and; and the next time we mayn't escape so easily."

"It was the fire," added Nor' West Nick, as he waddled forward and quickly trampled out the last sparks with his immense feet. "We needed it to play the circus properly, but its virtues have vanished. Out goes your light! and now we're all ready for work or play, noble boss!"

"First, gag and fasten that rascal to a tree where he'll be safe from the eyes of anybody passing near by," said Sol Scott, pointing to Fred Ducrow, who lay on his back glaring savagely from face to face, his unruly tongue kept between his teeth through dread of the huge fist which the ex-pugilist held above his battered face.

Promptly Turk and Nick crowded one of the gags into the wide mouth of the outlaw, binding it securely behind his neck, then dragging him into the densest part of the undergrowth and binding him fast to the trunk of a stunted tree.

While they were thus engaged, Sol Scott took charge of Tim Warden, leading him out to where the lifeless body of Aces-and lay in its gore, and forcing him to look down upon those pale, haggard, agony-distorted features. And his cold tones were emphasized by the vise-like grip he kept on the arm of the prisoner.

"You see your late master, Tim Warden? Dead—just as you will be, if you have lied to us in your story—only with this exception: Where he died all in an instant, without even feeling the first pang of pain, you will die a lingering death, long drawn out, filled with the most exquisite tortures the human mind can conceive! You will long and pray for death as a blessed boon, long before the end will come! This I swear to you by all I hold dear—by my wife and child!"

"I've told you true," muttered the trembling wretch. "You'll find it jest as I said, boss!"

"So much the better for you, then!" Sol Scott led the prisoner back to the little glade, and he was about to give orders concerning the temporary disposal of the body, when Enoch Dodge intervened:

"Never you borry trouble 'long o' that kar'on, Sol. The ole man'll 'tend to it. It won't tell no tales afore publishin' time, be sure!"

"If you say so, it's enough," was the quiet reply. "Of course, we will find you here when we come back?"

Enoch Dodge nodded emphatically.

"Good again. Now, Tim Warden, one last word. You are to guide us to the spot where Johnny's Infant has the children in charge. You are to give us warning when we come within two hundred yards of the spot. You will then be left behind, while we advance to prove the truth of your story. If it is straight, so much the better for you. If a lie—all heaven and earth can't save you from feeling our vengeance!"

Tim Warden began to mutter his perfect good faith, but at a motion from Sol Scott, Turk Elder grasped and held him powerless, while Nor' West Nick thrust a gag between his lips, tying it firmly behind his neck. A pair of muffled handcuffs were placed upon his wrists, and then Sol Scott muttered his last warning:

"Lead the way, Tim Warden, and keep constantly in mind that it is *your life* you are working for—that an accident will be as fatal as a fault committed on purpose. It is success, complete and perfect, or it is death for you. Now lead on."

With an alacrity that showed how fully he believed in his own story, or else was born of fear for these stern players in the big game of freeze-out, Tim Warden advanced, winding through the tangled bushes, amid the rocks and over the broken ground. At his side strode Sol Scott, knife bared in his firm grip, one eye constantly on his guide, as though determined not to throw away a chance in that dangerous game.

This was only prudence, but in this case it was superfluous. Tim Warden was hardly a marvel of pluck and "sand." He was a thoroughbred rascal in all but dare-devil bravery. He could cut a throat or cut a purse as deftly and as coolly as the best, where the odds were in his favor, but let him be driven into a corner, as now, and he became a very cur, ready to do anything for dear life.

He had witnessed the death of Aces-and. He believed that Johnny-jump-up had met a similar fate. He felt that the gang was doomed to worse than defeat, and now had thoughts only of his own safety. To preserve his own vile life, he would have betrayed his own father to death.

Silently, swiftly, he guided the four members of the Royal Flush to the vicinity of the retreat

selected by Aces-and for those in charge of the three children. He led them as near as he dared, then halted and nodded vigorously as Sol Scott turned and peered keenly into his eyes.

"Nod toward the point where the rascals are stationed," softly breathed the detective. "I told you to stop within two hundred yards. If we are not more than that, nod again."

Tim Warden promptly complied with both directions, and Sol added:

"We will leave you here, where we can find you again. If you have lied in any way, say your prayers before we come back. You'll have too much else on hand, then!"

With a lariat he bound the rascal to a rock that lay in the deep shadow, securing his limbs so that it would be impossible for him to either escape or to make noise sufficient to alarm his fellows beyond, then the party left him. Only for a few paces, then Sol Scott said:

"If we could trust the rascal thoroughly, he would be of great aid to us, mates. He could decoy the ruffians from the children far enough for us to get between them and—"

"I'll run no such risks," doggedly muttered Dan Brown. "I'll only trust to my own arm—that and this good steel!"

He drew his knife and touched it to his pallid lips, like one who breathed a silent but fervid vow upon the gleaming steel.

"All right," quietly responded Sol Scott. "I am rather more than half of your opinion, mate. We can do the work, and do it silently. Only to save a life of the children must we burn powder. A single shot might prove fatal to the dear ones over yonder!" nodding in the direction of the cavern.

There was no response. One and all, they knew how terribly true were those words, and each man gripped his steel with vicious energy.

Sol Scott said no more. The Royal Flush had acted in concert for so many days, in so many adventures where a single blunder or a single mistake might mean death to one and all, that there was no need of cautions or repeating of signals. They each man knew what was to be done, and like men they lost no time in talking it over.

Sol Scott and Dan Brown took the lead, moving slowly, cautiously, silently through the night, with Nor' West Nick and Turk Elder close at their heels. Their first duty was to discover the exact location of the enemy.

This proved to be a far easier task than even the most sanguine of their number had dared to hope. Johnny's Infant was in command of the party, and his bump of prudence was not large enough to make him pass the night without the aid of a fire. Perhaps he was not over anxious to escape discovery, so intense was his hatred for Willie Brown, born of that gallant attempt to free his mother from the grasp of the outlaw brother.

Be that as it may, Johnny's Infant was now lying near a small but bright fire, the three children lying within reach of his long arms, bound hand and foot, with rags tied tightly over their mouths. If he could only know what deadly passions that sight aroused in the hearts of the fathers as they peered out upon the scene.

To one side, but still within the circle of fire-light, the other guards were bending over a greasy deck of cards, playing as earnestly and cheating each other as viciously as though the pebbles which they were betting, represented so much virgin gold!

Sol Scott took in the scene at a glance, noting its advantages for and against them, then touched his brother detective on the arm and as silently crept backward until it was safe to whisper.

"You noticed the rocks a little back of the big devil, mate?"

Dan Brown nodded, swiftly, his blue eyes glittering like fireballs.

"You and I will make for that cover. Turk and Nick will creep up to the bushes on the left of the two rascals playing cards, and bounce them. We will manage the big fellow. He is the one who will try hardest to hurt the children. It is all understood, mates?"

Silent nods responded, and then the party separated, making each a half circuit of the camp.

Few words, fewer instructions, but enough. They understood each other so fully, had such implicit confidence in each other, that more would have been superfluous.

Never before in all their eventful careers had Sol Scott or Dan Brown of Denver shown such skill and silence in covering rough ground. They were working for priceless stakes—for their children!

Not a sound warned Johnny's Infant of the peril that threatened him. Not a suspicion of danger lessened the interest of the gamblers. All unconscious of how near their rope had run out, two of them played and cheated, one watched the pale face of the gallant little lad whose throat his fingers were itching to grip and grip until life should go out forever!

And then—The brother detectives gained their selected ambush. They peered out upon their unsuspecting prey, then cast a glance over to the clump of bushes, to see Nor' West Nick hold up his

gleaming knife as a token that all was ready with him and his mate.

And then—Out leaped the two athletes, Sol Scott landing on the shoulders of the giant, Dan Brown sweeping the three children to one side, taking their place with flashing knife, ready to cleave the heart of Johnny's Infant.

Up sprung Turk Elder and Nor' West Nick, striking swift and sure with their weapons, sending the gamblers into another world before either could utter a groan, much less grasp a weapon.

Sol Scott rebounded from the shoulders of Johnny's Infant, only to drop upon him with uplifted knife. Not to strike. For, strange as it may seem, the giant made no effort to arise or to cry out. His neck was broken by that savage shock, and he never knew what hurt him.

A moment later the gags were cut away, and the fathers held their children to their hearts, in an ecstasy of joy that was almost delirious in its intensity! And little Willie cried:

"I *knowed* you'd come, papa! I *knowed* you would, but—mamma, too!"

"You shall see her, and soon, my little man. I swear it by all that heaven holds holy!" brokenly uttered Dan Brown of Denver.

CHAPTER XXII.

"A ROYAL FLUSH!"

As the four members of the Royal Flush listened to the account given by little Willie Brown of all that had occurred, more than one muttered a regret that Aces-and and Johnny's Infant were too dead to be restored to life again, if only for a brief space!

"If they are beyond our vengeance, others of the same accursed gang still live!" uttered Dan Brown, his face pale and hard-set, his eyes glowing fiercely. "Leave this carrion where it lies. May the wolves and vultures give them burial, for no honest man shall so disgrace his hands!"

Nor' West Nick passed from one body to another, giving each a keen and careful scrutiny, to make sure no spark of life remained. He lingered longest over the corpse of Johnny's Infant, and when he turned from it at length, the fat detective was wiping his long knife. And he muttered confidentially in the ear of Turk Elder:

"There's nothing like being dead sure, pard. These broken necks are mighty deceptive sometimes, and that critter carried too much muscle and natural cussedness wrapped up in his hide to run any risks with. Let him come to now, if he can!"

Turk Elder winked knowingly as he chuckled slyly.

"The necks *he* breaks don't never give no trouble, honey! That I kin take my davy to, fer yender ain't the fu'st one I've seen him snap!"

"Well," sighed the fat member of the Royal Flush, "it can't be helped now. Man is born to trouble, but I don't feel so awful sorry at having taken a little extra on his account!"

Sol Scott carried his daughter, and Dan Brown the other two children. He would not yield the care of one of them to either of his mates. It seemed as though they had been restored to him from the very grave.

Sol Scott paused for a moment beside the bound and helpless outlaw whose fear of death had led him to betray his fellows, and bade him possess his soul in patience as best he might.

"When we win the final victory, Tim Warden, you shall be set free and permitted to go your way. Until then you are safer here than you would be running round loose. If you wish to hasten that time, pray for the defeat of your former mates in evil."

There was no reply in words as the detectives passed on, but if looks could kill, not one of them would have taken a second step. Himself a traitor, perjured, forsworn, Tim Warden felt that he was left thus to perish by inches of thirst and hunger, if the wild beasts failed to scent him out and hasten the coming of death. And as the moments rolled by, he suffered all the torments of the damned. Even he was not to fall out of that big game of freeze-out without paying the penalty.

A cautious signal warned Enoch Dodge of their coming, and that gaunt worthy met them with a genial smile that at once set at rest the anxious fears which showed in the eyes of Dan Brown.

"It's all right, then? You've got the key you spoke of?" he muttered, for the first time since their recovery, permitting the feet of his children to touch the ground.

The genial face clouded just a trifle, and the cheerful voice grew graver as Enoch Dodge responded:

"Let Turk keep the young 'uns fer a bit, mate, an' I'll show ye. But fu'st—mebbe you'd like another glimpse at Aces-and?"

There was something peculiar in the tones and manner of the ex-mayor of Grenada, and without a word Dan Brown complied. The children were turned over to the ex-pugilist, with whom they were on excellent terms, and the other members of the Royal Flush followed Enoch Dodge out of the little clearing and to a secluded

spot where lay the stiff and lifeless body of the chief of the kidnapers.

Without a word Enoch Dodge stooped and removed a few leafy twigs which until then concealed the head and face of the outlaw. The moonlight fell clearly upon a ghastly object, and short cries of wondering horror broke from the lips of the others, so wholly unexpected was this frightful sight.

It was unmistakably the figure of the outlaw chief, but where had been the thick crop of jetty hair, the heavy growth of beard and mustaches, was now only a gory blank!

In silence Enoch Dodge let the leafy screen drop over the frightful object, moving slowly back a few paces, folding his arms over his bosom and gazing fixedly into the eyes of Dan Brown as he spoke:

"It's the fu'st time in all my life that I mutilated the body of a enemy, mates. It wasn't so easy doin' it now, black an' foul as ye all know the critter to've bin while alive an' kickin'. To save my own life I couldn't 'a' done it nur yit to save that o' the best fri'nd the hull airth holds fer me, ef that fri'nd was a man an' able to fight fer his own self.

"But when it come to wimmen—to the mothers o' them pore little kids over yend—I shet my teeth an' tuck holt to stay! Aces-and was dead. It didn't hurt him. Whar he's gone to ha'r wouldn't last long enough to sw'ar by. It couldn't do him no good, but it mought be the means o' sarvin' his betters; an' so I tuck it off.

"Ef they was time, I mought 'a' left the hide it was hitched on to, but they wasn't. An' so—ye see, mates—yar she am!"

As he spoke, Enoch Dodge held out a ghastly disguise.

Dan Brown caught at both it and the idea of the gaunt detective. It promised success. It gave him renewed hope of rescuing his wife without running too long risks of her injury. And that was enough to drive away all scruples.

"Tain't so bad as it mought be," chuckled Dodge, feeling a great relief as he read the changes in the countenance of his mate. "I've dreened it dry, an' tucked in a bit linin' so's it won't—"

"Do you think I care for that, old friend?" and Dan Brown caught him by the hand and wrung it forcibly enough to have brought tears of pain from the eyes of a marble statue—almost! "You give me a good hope of rescuing our dear ones, and—I can't talk, but some day I'll prove my gratitude."

"Let it take off that cuss o' yours, old fri'nd, an' I won't ax another cent!" chuckled Enoch Dodge, a moisture in his eyes such as seldom found its way there.

Sol Scott took the hideous disguise and carefully examined it. A grave expression rested upon his face, which Enoch Dodge hastened to banish by a little explanation:

"It kin be done, pard. You fergit how the critter hed his face all tied up, but I hain't. With them ha'rs, them bandages, an' the duds they is on the dead critter in place o' them he now w'ars, Dan kin walk right through the gang up yender, an' never hev a word said to him!"

"I know—I was thinking of something else," slowly uttered Sol Scott. "Not of his getting in while so disguised, but how he could take me with him."

"It wouldn't do—wouldn't do a-tall!" spluttered Dodge.

"Possibly not," was the quiet response. "Well, about the children? Dare we leave them alone? And yet, it will be heavy enough odds for the entire Flush to meet. With an eye to their safety, I mean, of course. Only for them—"

"We could lick double the bunch," promptly supplied Nor' West Nick as the detective paused abruptly.

"The little gals is asleep," softly called out Turk Elder. "They won't be likely to wake up afore we kin git through over yender. An' the boy—"

"Will stay and watch over them while we go to bring his mamma to him again," quickly uttered Dan Brown, hiding the grim disguise as he strode forward and took the hand of Willie.

"If I had a gun I wouldn't be afeard," slowly responded the little hero. "I shot two men 'cause they was naughty to my mamma, an' I'll shoot some more if they come 'sturbin' the babies—so I will!"

Dan Brown stooped and clasped the brave little fellow to his bosom, kissing him time and again. And then he gave him a revolver, one of those to regain possession of which Aces-and had rushed headlong upon his death—bade him prove himself father's little hero, and keep faithful watch and ward over the little girls. And Willie promised, proud of his trust, even anxious for his responsibility to begin.

Another kiss and Dan Brown turned away, cold and hard, donning the ghastly disguise, changing his clothes for those worn by Aces-and.

"I would wear his whole hide, if necessary," he laughed, hardly, as Enoch Dodge drew back with an approving nod at his work. "For their sake, you understand."

"It'll work—i's boun' to work," chuckled

Dodge, rubbing his hands until the horny palms sent out a grating sound. "You kin walk right through hellhoun's an' git atween them an' the leddies. An' when you do, jes' open fire on the cussed critters, an' we'll bounce 'em from behind. Atween us all, I don't reckon many'll stop fer the rope!"

"You've got to take me with you, pard," quietly uttered Sol Scott.

Dan Brown started and stared into his face with open-eyed amazement.

His brother detective laughed shortly, nodding confirmation.

"Why not? It can be done—it *must* be done!" with a sudden fire in his eyes and almost fierceness in his tones. "Think you I'll be content to wait outside while you take all the risk on your shoulders? It is my wife in peril, to the full as great as that which threatens yours. Those devils will try their best to even up the score when the alarm breaks out. No one man can check them in such close quarters, if they make a determined rush to kill their captives. *It must be, pard!*"

"But how?" muttered Dan Brown, confusedly.

"Easy enough," and Sol Scott laughed softly, the hard look vanishing like magic from his face. "A captive to your bow and spear, most noble Aces-and! A spy caught skulking near the cavern and brought in to share the fate of the other prisoners. A notable capture—no less than one of the Royal Flush!"

"It mought work," slowly uttered Enoch Dodge, rubbing his chin as he stared fixedly at vacancy. "He kin hev a pa'r o' irons put onto his wrists, lookin' mighty safe, but so's he kin drap 'em off at a wink. He kin tote guns under his clo's. It'll work, sure!"

"It must work," coldly added Sol Scott, producing the handcuffs and seemingly locking them on his wrists.

"It will keep the knaves from looking too narrowly at the counterfeit of their head dog," nodded Nor' West Nick, approvingly. "They'll have eyes only for the captive, and it won't be hard for our mates to get between them and the ladies. Then—well, I'd bet my mine, the Jealous Girl, that Dan and Sol could clean out the whole gang without our help!"

"But they won't—they ain't sech durned hogs as that!" impulsively cried Turk Elder, an anxious look in his eyes. "We want some o' the fun too, I reckon!"

"Enough for a bite, pard," grinned Nor' West Nick, falling in with the ex-pugilist as the Royal Flush started toward the cavern to play the last hand in the Big Game of Freeze-out. "If the count don't lie, there's thirteen of the p'izen critters in the hole. I reckon we can manage to have a little sport before their lights all go out!"

Then all tongues were stilled. Each man knew how important it was to avoid awakening suspicion, and like shadows rather than flesh and blood, they stole along through the night, warily on the guard against running into any sentinel, perfectly familiar with the nature of the ground immediately surrounding the cavern in which the kidnapers had sought refuge.

Enoch, Turk and Nor' West Nick were dropped as soon as the cover nearest the cave entrance was gained, and suddenly rising erect, one hand gripping the shoulder of his seeming captive, the other holding a cocked revolver, Dan Brown of Denver strode steadily up the slope.

A sharp whistle rung out from the leafy screen, telling him that at least one of the enemy was on guard, and promptly he answered the challenge by uttering in an admirable imitation of Aces-and's voice:

"All right, my man! I've got a prize here for you fellows—an infernal spy whom I caught skulking down yonder!"

A low ejaculation came from the cover, but whether of joy or discovery Dan Brown did not stop to ask. It was a critical moment, but he knew how much depended on audacity, and still gripping Sol Scott, he pressed forward, into the narrow entrance.

"Give way, man!" he muttered sharply, as he caught a faint outline before him. "This devil is hard to hold! Out and call up the lads for a free circus!"

The guard fell back, and the next instant Dan Brown stepped into the lighted rock chamber, his keen eyes taking in his surroundings at a single glance.

He counted thirteen men, and his heart leaped into his throat as he felt that had Tim Warden spoken the truth, Rachel and May must be left without a guard over them. He saw the dark passage at the opposite end of the chamber, and with a wave of his armed hand he moved in that direction, unheeding the cries which arose from the lips of the wondering yet exultant kidnapers as they recognized Sol Scott.

"He's Sol Scott!"

"Now we *will* hev a circus!"

"Turn the durn bloodhoun' over to us, boss!"

Dan Brown shook his armed hand viciously as these fierce cries broke forth, and the ruffians fell back a little. He moved a few steps nearer that important passage, as he spoke sharply:

"Time enough yet, my bully boys! Sol Scott shall die, but before he croaks, he's got a story

to tell. I'm afraid Johnny-jump-up has had bad luck, or he'd have been back before now. And if not—how could this bloodhound know where we might be found? How comes it that I caught him skulking down there, working up this way, as surely as though he really possessed the nose of a sleuth-hound?"

The low growling grew louder and more vicious. Evil eyes glared savagely at the pale, stern face of the seeming captive. Hands dropped to weapons. From growls and snarlings, came open threats. The ruffians were already lapping his blood in fancy. They would soon make the attempt in deadly earnest.

"Keep your distance, men!" sternly cried Dan Brown as he leaped back until near the coveted position. "Not until he has spoken all!"

Then—how it came about, who shall say?

"Dan—my husband! Thank heaven you have come!" came clearly from the rock-cell beyond, and forgetting his disguise, the detective cried clearly in answer:

"Here, wife! to save you or share your fate!"

A wild, savage howl burst from the lips of the outlaws, and their weapons flashed forth as they saw through that daring imposition. And hurling the handcuffs into their midst, Sol Scott jerked out a pair of revolvers, keeping time to the rapid succession of reports that were already coming from the tools grasped by Dan Brown, of Denver!

Two men against a dozen, but those two! And from outside came loud shouts of encouragement from the remainder of the Royal Flush!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BIG GAME LOST AND WON.

COOL-HEADED, steady-nerved though the trio remaining behind were, it was terribly trying for them to remain under cover while their two partners walked into the very jaws of death, as it were.

They watched until they saw them vanish from sight as though melting into the hill, just after that low whistle came to their ears. And then they made their ears do duty for eyes, listening breathlessly for the signal-shot that was to summon them to the feast of death.

"They've got a heap sight the reskiest part, but durned ef this waitin' an' hanging on by the eye-winkers ain't a monstrous heap the nastiest!" and in muttering this, Turk Elder did no more than express the sentiments of his comrades.

It was terribly hard to wait in idleness, even for those few minutes. Wait, knowing that each instant that passed might bring death to one or both of the friends whom they had learned to love so dearly. Wait, without the power of averting or of sharing their fortunes!

And waiting became tenfold harder when they caught the echoes of those bloodthirsty cries coming from the kidnapers as they recognized Scott in the seeming prisoner.

"Mebbe the hellhoun's hev smoked the boss!" huskily muttered Turk Elder, who loved Dan Brown of Denver only second to Sol Scott. "Mebbe they've mounted 'em without givin' 'em a chaine fer to burn powder. An' we a-squattin' yer like a bump on a log!"

"Lightning itself couldn't stop his finger from pullin' trigger," a little sharply retorted Nor' West Nick. "It'll come, never you fear. But I'm fatter and shorter-legged than either of you, so I'm going to crawl a little nigher, to sorter equalize matters."

The fat detective actually suited his actions to his words, and venturing from cover he began crawling up the slope.

That was too much for even level-headed Enoch Dodge, and he broke cover side by side with Turk Elder, breasting the slope with all the activity of a young lover whose sweetheart is beckoning him.

Then it was that the first pistol shot echoed from the interior, and with loud, encouraging yells the remainder of the Royal Flush rushed to the cave entrance, pistols out and trigger fingers itching.

They were seen by at least one pair of eyes before they could reach the entrance, but instead of firing a shot at their dimly seen figures, the outlaw stooped lower under cover, lifting a screen from a bed of glowing coals, dropping on them a little powder that sent a ball of luminous smoke rolling toward the zenith. Again and again in swift succession, casting frightened glances over his shoulder toward the cavern, from whence now came a terrible tumult. Ball after ball of fire rose into the air, until there was a tall column that seemed strung together on invisible thread. The signal for Johnny's Infant to put to death his three charges!

Unseen by his eyes, cold in death as they now lay!

Seen by other eyes, no less eager to interpret its meaning!

After all, the powder was not wasted.

And inside the cavern all was fierce strife and bloodshed and death, the Royal Flush fighting for what they held dearer far than their own lives, the outlaws fighting for revenge and for life.

Shoulder to shoulder stood Dan Brown and Sol Scott, barring the way to the rock chamber where lay their dear ones, bound and helpless, shuddering with fear—not for themselves, but for the husbands whom they knew must conquer or die in this desperate struggle.

Shoulder to shoulder, with arms extended and streams of fire and lead issuing from two brace of the deadliest pistols in all the cattle country! Each shot aimed to kill. Not a trigger pulled wildly. Every stroke delivered as though on it alone depended the result of that final hand in the Big Game of Freeze-out opened by Aces-and.

With lead whistling and humming around them, glancing, spattering from the rough rocks behind and at either hand, stinging them smartly as they rebounded, sufficient to drive less cool hands into a belief that they were attacked in the rear. With men more nearly resembling demons, pressing upon them, cursing, howling, gnashing their teeth in wildest rage, in most savage lust for revenge; still shoulder to shoulder, and with nerves as cool and steady as though this was but a harmless mock-battle for the amusement of idle spectators before the scenes.

And then, shouting each according to his own peculiar humor, the remaining three of the Royal Flush burst through the narrow passage leading from the outer world.

"A straight flush against the world!" cried Nor' West Nick, as he struck right and left with his clubbed pistols, afraid to use lead until he could more perfectly make out the shapes of his comrades.

"Tain't wimmen nur yit little babes you critters is buckin' ag'in' this deal, durn ye!" snarled Enoch Dodge, as his left hand drove a long knife fairly through the body of the first foeman he could reach.

Not a word uttered Turk Elder after that first wild roar. He seemed to forget that he had weapons other than those furnished him by nature, for as he plunged into the midst of the melee he struck out with his huge fists, knocking strong men endlong with as much seeming ease as though they were but bundles of straw.

All this almost simultaneously.

Barely a score of seconds had elapsed since the first shot fired by Dan Brown when the trio plunged into the smoke-filled chamber. Not more than as many moments more could pass before the end had come and the victory was won.

Thirteen men at the outset. One minute of that hot work, and not a single member of the baker's dozen remained upon his feet. All down; some dead, others dying, not one left who could wield weapon to give or invite death in preference to the impending rope!

And then, scarce waiting to see that the victory was insured, the "Big Game" fairly won, Dan Brown and Sol Scott rushed back through the narrow passage to where their dear wives lay bound, praying for their victory, for their safety as well!

And it was not until their keen knives cut those bonds, until their strong arms raised the rescued to their feet, until they stood bosom to bosom, the women sobbing, the men whispering glad tidings through their kisses and caresses, relieving their last maternal fears; not until then did either Dan Brown or Sol Scott know that they had failed to pass unscathed through that fiery ordeal. Nor even then, but for the love-sharpened eyes of their wives.

"It is nothing, dear," laughed Dan Brown, smothering the cry of apprehension which rose to the lips of Rachel as she saw the red blood flowing from his face, his breast. "And you, brother—Ha!"

He saw Sol Scott turning pale, and beginning to sway unsteadily as May Scott clung to him, seeking to lend him support. He saw the red tide bubbling from his broad chest, and leaping forward, he was just in time to save his friend from falling headlong.

Satisfied that the two detectives would prefer to be alone with their rescued ones for a time, neither of the trio followed them, but gave the first few moments to making sure that none of the outlaws had power sufficient to give them further trouble. Those who were only stunned or disabled, were disarmed and drawn aside from the dead. Then Enoch Dodge passed out to the entrance, to make sure none of the enemy were plotting mischief from that quarter.

He had no more than passed his head and long neck through the leafy screen before that column of red balls caught his eye and drew a sharp exclamation from his lips.

"What now, pard?" cried Nor' West Nick, rushing to his side with weapons in readiness for further hot work, should such be before them.

"Look thar!" muttered Enoch Dodge, pointing to the red balls of light, the top ones beginning to sway to one side as they struck a current of air. "Our signals, sent up by some o' the pizen imps!"

"Not from any who were inside," quickly answered Nor' West Nick, his huge mustaches curling and writhing with excitement.

"Most likely the critter Tim Warden said was posted to send 'em up fer Johnny's Infant,"

muttered Enoch Dodge, a low, peculiar laugh parting his thin lips. "The signal o' death, pard! An' ef the big critter can't see it, I reckon they's eyes on the lookout that kin!"

Nor' West Nick started with something suspiciously like an oath.

"You don't mean—"

"Ef I don't I'm a liar!" chuckled Dodge, his gray eyes snapping. "Johnny-jump-up'll git cured o' his nettlin' in a heap bigger hurry then ever I hed any idee! He will, sure's you're a foot high!"

"The old boy be good to him!" devoutly ejaculated Nor' West Nick as he partially turned his head and added: "Turk, you dwarf! why don't you say something? Why don't—eh?"

A faint sound came to his ears, and wheeling, he rushed back into the cavern to see the expugilist leaning against the rock wall, one hand pressed tightly to his side, his face ghastly white, but with a smile on his honest lips.

"Got it, pard! Got it—right whar—I live!"

An hour later Enoch Dodge was mounted and riding at breakneck speed toward the distant ranch of Sol Scott, to meet the men who he knew were even then hastening toward the spot from whence those red balls had ascended. He met them little more than half-way. He sent two of the cowboys off in quest of medical aid, then more leisurely retraced his steps with the remainder of the party.

Rapidly their tongues wagged, though Enoch Dodge had to do by far the most of the talking. For the others, a few sentences disposed of all that would interest the patient reader who has followed us this far.

Though he could not have suspected such would be the case, Aces-and sealed the death-warrant of his only brother when he gave his man orders to send up those glowing balls of smoke. That, it may be remembered, was the signal agreed upon by the Royal Flush before taking the trail, that the information given them by Johnny-jump-up was false. And as soon as the many keen eyes on the lookout caught sight of the rising globes, that groaning, moaning, half-crazed wretch was dragged to the tree before the ruined Single Pot Ranch and hanged.

As for the story Enoch Dodge had to repeat, much that he said has already been spread before the reader. Of the rest, a brief glance will be sufficient.

Sol Scott and Turk Elder were severely wounded. It might be even mortally, though tough old Enoch would not admit as much.

"They'll pull through," he said, doggedly. "They're too clean white to go under at the say-so of any sech dirty whelps as them!"

And in the end he was justified, though for many long weeks Sol Scott hovered on the very verge of the grave, only kept from filling one by the tender care and boundless love shown by his wife and the wife of his brother detective. And—who knows?—perhaps the love of the remainder of "THE ROYAL FLUSH" helped him to foil grim death.

As for Turk Elder, he was afoot long before his loved partner and master, as he would persist in calling Sol Scott. Perhaps, too, he might have fared worse only for his dog-like love. He thought only of Sol Scott, and wanted to be up and doing for him.

Tim Warden was set at liberty, as promised, but with a stern warning that he had better seek out healthier quarters. He lost no time in acting on that advice, and was never more seen or heard of by the detectives.

Fred Ducrow, with the kidnappers who survived that brief, hurricane fight in the cavern, stood trial on a score of charges, either one of which was quite sufficient to insure him a speedy passage "over the range" had sentence been carried out according to law. It was not, but the substitute furnished by a crowd of men with turned coats and blackened faces proved quite as effective.

"Committed suicide by hanging!" was the grim verdict rendered by the only jury that viewed them—composed for the most part of men whose general build, voices, manners, all might have found a counterpart in the mob that broke open the prison doors and dragged the evil wretches to their doom!

And THE ROYAL FLUSH?

It still exists, though not as such, unless events should occur to render such a reunion necessary.

Nor' West Nick returned to Rocky Bar, to look after his "Jealous Girl."

Turk Elder resigned his position as detective, and settled down as overseer for Sol Scott, who still runs his ranch.

Enoch Dodge, restless, roving soul! could not remain long absent from his pet town, Grenada. But before he shook hands with his mates in that desperate game for heavy stakes, he said:

"When you've got any more fun sech as these on han's, you don't want to leave out the ole man! He ain't quite so spry nur so soople as he use to was, but they ain't a young colt in the hull range as kin 'joy the fun any better'n he kin, now that's so!"

Dan Brown quickly rebuilt his ranch, and settled down to enjoy a much needed rest. He had nobly earned it, and that at the cost of almost breaking down his magnificent constitution. But he quickly recuperated, and what with teasing Rachel with her elopement, teaching Willie to shoot straighter, learning Cherry to ride and throw a miniature lasso, and—but why continue?

Dan Brown was out of harness for the time being. He was at home, with wife and children, loving and loved. His brother pard was within easy reach. He had plenty—all the heart could wish for.

And who shall say he did not fairly deserve it all?

THE END.

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